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MILTON

BY

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AUTHOR OF "THE CLAIMS OF FRENCH
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MILTON! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

WORDSWORTH.

O Mighty-mouth'd inventor of harmonies,
O skill'd to sing of Time or Eternity,
God-gifted organ-voice of England,
Milton, a name to resound for ages;
Whose Titan angels, Gabriel, Abdiel,
Starr'd from Jehovah's gorgeous armouries,
Tower, as the deep-doomed empyrean
Rings to the roar of an angel onset—
Mc rather all that bowery loneliness,
The brooks of Eden mazily murmuring,
And bloom profuse and cedar arches
Charm, as a wanderer out in ocean,
Where some refulgent sunset of India
Streams o'er a rich ambrosial ocean isle,
And crimson-hued the stately palm-woods
Whisper in odorous heights of even.

TENNYSON.

MILTON

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

WHEN a man spends a day walking in hilly country he is often astonished at the new shape taken on by a mountain when it is looked at from a new point of view. Sometimes the change is so great as to make it almost unrecognizable. He who has seen Snowdon from Capel-Curig is reluctant to admit that what he sees from Llanberis is the same mountain: he who has seen the Langdale Pikes from Glaramara is amazed at their beauty as he gazes at them from the garden at Low Wood. These are extreme cases. But to a less degree every traveller among the mountains is experiencing the same thing all day. He finds the eternal hills the most plastic of forms. At each change in his own position there is a change in the shape of a mountain under which he is passing. He may keep his eye fixed upon it but insensibly, as he watches, the long

chain will become a vertical peak, the jagged precipice a round green slope.

Much the same process goes on as the generations of men pass on their way, with their eyes fixed, as they cannot help being, on the great human heights of their own and earlier days. Many of these look great only when you are close to them. At a little distance they are seen to be small and soon they disappear altogether. The true mountains remain but they do not keep the same shape. Each succeeding generation sees the peaks of humanity from a new point of view which cannot be exactly the same as that of its predecessor. Each age reshapes for itself its conception of art, of poetry, of religion, and of human life which includes them all. Of some of the masters in each of these worlds it feels that they belong not to their own generation only but to all time and so to itself. It cannot be satisfied, therefore, with what its predecessors have said about them. It needs to see them again freshly for itself, and put into words so far as it can its own attitude towards them.

That is the excuse for the new books which will always be written every few years about Hebrew Religion, or Greek Art, or the French Revolution, or about such men as Plato,

St. Paul, Shakspeare, Napoleon. It is the excuse even for a much humbler thing, for the addition of a volume on Milton to the Home University Library. The object of this Library is not, indeed, to say anything startlingly new about the great men with whom it deals. Rather the contrary, in fact: for to say anything startlingly new about Shakspeare or Plato would probably be merely to say what is absurd or false. The main outlines of these great figures have long been settled, and the man who writes a book to prove that Shakspeare was not a great dramatist, or was an exact and lucid writer, is wasting his own time and that of his readers. The mountain may change its aspect from hour to hour, but when once we have ascertained that it is composed of granite, that matter is settled, and there is no use in arguing that it is sandstone or basalt. The object of such volumes as those of this Library is no vain assault on the secure judgment-seat of the world, no hopeless appeal against the recorded and accepted decrees of time. It is rather to re-state those decrees in modern language and from the point of view of our own day: to show, for instance, how Plato, though no longer for us what he was for the Neo-Platonists, is

still for us the most moving mind of the race that more than all others has moved the mind of the world; how Milton, though no longer for us a convincing justifier of the ways of God to men, is still a figure of transcendent interest, the most lion-hearted, the loftiest-souled, of Englishmen, the one consummate artist our race has produced, the only English man of letters who in all that is known about him, his life, his character, his poetry, shows something for which the only fit word is sublime.

There was much else beside, of course. The sublime is very near the terrible, and the terrible is often not very far removed from the hateful. Dante giving his "daily dreadful line" to the private and public enemies with whom he grimly populates his hell is not exactly an amiable or attractive figure. Still less so is Milton in those prose pamphlets in which he passes so rapidly, and to us so strangely, from the heights of heaven to the gutter mud of scurrilous personalities. This is a disease from which our more amiable age seems at last to have delivered the world. But Milton has at least the excuse of a long and august tradition, from the days of Demosthenes, equally profuse of a patriotism as lofty and of personalities as

base as Milton's, to those of a whole line of the scholars of the Renaissance who lived with the noblest literature of the world and wrote of each other in the language of Billingsgate fishwives. So the sublimity of his life is wholly that of an irresistible will, set from the first on achieving great deeds and victoriously achieving them in defiance of adverse men and fates. But this is quite compatible with qualities the reverse of agreeable. It is the business of sublimity to compel amazed admiration, not to be a pleasant companion. Milton rejoicing over the tortures bishops will suffer in hell, Milton insulting Charles I, Milton playing the tyrant to his daughters, none of these are pleasant pictures. But such incidents, if perhaps unusually grim in the case of Milton, are apt to happen with Olympians. Experience shows that it is generally best to listen to their thunder from a certain distance.

Such limitations must not be ignored. But neither must they be unduly pressed. The important thing about the sun is not its spots but its light and heat. No great poet in all history, with the possible exception of Dante, has so much heat as Milton. In prose and verse alike he burns and glows with fire. At its worst it is a fire of anger and pride, at

its best a fire of faith in liberty, justice, righteousness, God. Of the highest of all fires, the white flame of love, it has indeed little. Milton had no Beatrice to teach him how to show men the loveliness of the divine law, the beauty of holiness. He could describe the loss of Paradise and even its recovery, but its eternal bliss, the bliss of those who live in the presence of

l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle,

he could not describe. To do that required one who had seen the Vita Nuova before he saw the Inferno. *In la sua volontade é nostra pace*. So Dante thought : but not altogether so Milton. It is not a difference of theological opinion : it is a difference of temper. For Dante the "will of God" at once suggested both the apostolic and the apocalyptic love, joy, peace, the supreme and ultimate beatific vision. Bitter as his life on earth had been, no man ever suffering more from evil days and evil tongues, no man ever more bitterly conscious of living in an evil and perverse generation, he had yet within him a perpetual fountain of peace in the thought of God's will, and the faith that he was daily advancing nearer to the light of heaven and the divine presence. Milton, a sincere believer in God

if man ever were, must also at times have had his moments of beatific vision in which the invisible peace of God became more real than the storms of earthly life and the vileness of men. Indeed, we see the traces of such moments in the opening of *Comus*, in the concluding lines of *Lycidas*, in the sustained ecstasy of *At a Solemn Music*. But they appear to have been only moments. Milton was a lifelong Crusader who scarcely set foot in the Holy Land. The will of God meant for him not so much peace as war. He is a prophet rather than a psalmist. "Woe is me, my Mother, that thou hast born me a man of strife and contention," he himself complains in the *Reason of Church Government*. He was not much over thirty when he wrote those words: and they remained true of him to the end. For twenty years the strife was active and public; ever, in appearance at least, more and more successful: then for the final fourteen it became the impotent wrath of a caged and wounded lion. Never for a moment did his soul bow to the triumph of the idolaters: but neither could it forget them, nor make any permanent escape into purer air. *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson*, especially the last, are all plainly the works of a man conscious of

having been defeated by a world which he could defy but could not forget. Sublimely certain of the righteousness of his cause, he has no abiding certainty of its victory. He hears too plainly the insulting voices of the sons of Belial, and broods in proud and angry gloom over the ruin of all his hopes, personal, political and ecclesiastical. And as his religion was a thing of intellect and conscience, not a thing of spiritual vision, he cannot make for himself that mystical trans-valuation of all earthly doings in the light of which the struggles of political and ecclesiastical parties are seen as things temporary, trivial and of little account.

Such are the limitations of Milton. They are those of a man who lived in the time of a great national struggle, deliberately chose his own side in it, and from thenceforth saw nothing in the other but folly, obstinacy and crime. He has in him nothing whatever of the universal, and universally sympathetic, insight of Shakspeare. And he has paid the price of his narrowness in the open dislike, or at best grudging recognition, of that half of the world which is not Puritan and not Republican, and still looks upon history, custom, law and loyalty with very different eyes from his. But those who exact that

penalty do themselves at least as much injustice as they do Milton. To deprive ourselves of Milton because we are neither Puritan moralists nor Old Testament politicians is an act of intellectual suicide. The wise, as the world goes on, may differ more and more from some of Milton's opinions. They can never escape the greatness either of the poet or of the man. Men's appreciation of Milton is almost in proportion to their instinctive understanding of what greatness is. Other poets, perhaps, have things of greater beauty: none in English, none, perhaps, in any language, fills us with a more exalting conviction of the greatness of human life. No man rises from an hour with Milton without feeling ashamed of the triviality of his life and certain that he can, if he will, make it less trivial. It is impossible not to catch from him some sense of the high issues, immediate and eternal, on which human existence ought to be conscious that it hangs. The world will be very old before we can spare a man who can render us this service. We have no one in England who renders it so imperiously as Milton.

This part of his permanent claim upon our attention belongs to all that we know of him, to everything in his life so far as it is recorded,

even to his prose, where its appearances are occasional, as well as to his verse, where it is continuous and omnipresent. It is, of course, in connection with the last that we are most conscious of it and that it is most important. After all, the rest would have been unknown or forgotten if he had not been a great poet. But it is not merely by his force of mind and character, nor merely by the influence they have upon us through the poetry, that he claims our attention to-day. Altogether independently of that, the study of Milton is of immense and special value to Englishmen. Except in poetry our English contribution to the life of the arts in Europe has been comparatively small. That very Puritanism which had so much to do with the greatness of Milton has also had much to do with the general failure of Englishmen to produce fine art, or even to care about it, or so much as recognize it when they see it. Now Milton, Puritan as he was, was always, and not least in his final Puritan phase, a supreme artist. Poetry has been by far our greatest artistic achievement and he is by far our greatest poetic artist. No artist in any other field, no Inigo Jones or Wren, no Purcell, no Reynolds or Turner, holds such unquestioned eminence in any other art as he in his. If

the world asks us where to look for the genius of England, so far as it has ever been expressed on paper, we point, of course, unhesitatingly to Shakspeare. But Shakspeare is as inferior to Milton in art as he is superior in genius. His genius will often, indeed, supply the place of art; but the possession of powers that are above art is not the same thing as being continuously and consciously a great artist. We can all think of many places in his works where for hundreds of lines the most censorious criticism can scarcely wish a word changed; but we can also think of many in which the least watchful cannot fail to wish much changed and much omitted. "Would he had blotted a thousand" is still a true saying, and its truth known and felt by all but the blindest of the idolaters of Shakspeare. No one has ever uttered such a wish about the poetry of Milton. This is not the place to anticipate a discussion of it which must come later. But, in an introductory chapter which aims at insisting upon the present and permanent importance of Milton, it is in place to point out the immense value to the English race of acquaintance with work so conscientiously perfect as Milton's. English writers on the whole have had a tendency to be rather slipshod in

expression and rather indifferent to the finer harmonies of human speech, whether as a thing of pure sound or as a thing of sounds which have more than mere meaning, which have associations. Milton as both a lover of music and a scholar is never for a moment unconscious of either. It would scarcely be going too far to say that there is not a word in his verse which owes its place solely to the fact that it expresses his meaning. All the words accepted by his instinctive or deliberate choice were accepted because they provided him with the most he could obtain of three qualities which he desired : the exact expression of the meaning needed for the immediate purpose in hand, the associations fittest to enhance or enrich that meaning, the rhythmical or musical effect required for the verse. The study of his verse is one that never exhausts itself, so that the appreciation of it has been called the last reward of consummate scholarship. But the phrase does Milton some injustice. It is true that the scholar tastes again and again in Milton some flavour of association or suggestion which is not to be perceived by those who are not scholars, and it is also true that he consciously understands what he is enjoying more than they possibly can. But neither Milton's nor any other

great art makes its main appeal to learning. What does that is not art at all but pedantry. Those who have never read a line of the Greek and Latin poets certainly miss many pleasures in reading Milton, but, if they have any ear for poetry at all, they do not miss either the mind or the art of Milton. The unconquerable will, the high soaring soul, are everywhere audibly present : and so, even to those who have little reading and no knowledge at all of matters of rhythm or metre, are the grave Dorian music, the stately verses rolling in each after the other like great ocean waves in eternal difference, in eternal sameness. The ignorant ear hears and rejoices, with a delight that passes understanding, as the ignorant eye sees a fine drawing or a piece of Greek sculpture and without understanding enjoys, learns, and unconsciously grows in keenness of sight. To live with Milton is necessarily to learn that the art of poetry is no triviality, no mere amusement, but a high and grave thing, a thing of the choicest discipline of phrase, the finest craftsmanship of structure, the most nobly ordered music of sound. The ordinary reader may not be conscious of any such lessons : but he learns them nevertheless. And from no one else in English can he learn them so well as from Milton.

For these reasons, these and others, we must cling to our great epic poet, Shelley's "third among the sons of light." He is not easy reading: the greatest seldom are: but as with all the greatest, each new reading is not only easier than the last but fuller of matter for thought, wonder and delight. At each new reading, too, the things in him that belonged to his own age, the Biblical literalism, the theological prepossessions, the political partisanship, recede more and more into the background and leave us freer to enjoy the things which belong to all time. And to all peoples. Milton is, indeed, intensely English and could not have been anything but an Englishman. His profound conviction of the greatness of moral issues, and his passionate love of liberty, have both been characteristic of the Englishmen of whom England is most proud. Till lately too, at any rate, we should have said that his fierce individualism, intellectual and political, was English too. But his mind and soul, stored with the gathered riches of many languages and of an inward experience far too intense to be confined by national limitations, reach out to a world wider altogether than this island, wider even than Europe. In *Samson Agonistes* it is hard to say who is more vividly present, the English

politician, the Greek tragedian, or the Hebrew prophet. And in one sense *Paradise Lost* is the most universal of all poems. Indeed, that word may be applied to it in its strictest meaning, for the field of Milton's action is not Greece, or Italy, or England, or even the whole earth; it is the universe itself. That is one of its difficulties: but it is also a source of the uplifting and enlarging quality which is peculiarly Miltonic. With him we are conscious of treading no petty scene. We have in some respects travelled far from Milton's way both of stating and of solving his problem, but nevertheless it is still with us to-day and always: the problem of man's origin and destiny, of the ways of God to men. And though Milton is more hampered by literal belief in a particular theological legend than the authors of the *Book of Job* and the *Prometheus Vincetus*, yet, like these, he shows that a great mind and soul will leave the imprint of power and truth on the most incredible primitive story. To read his great poem, or indeed any of his poems, is to live for a while in the presence of one of those royal souls, those natural kings of men, whom Plato felt to be born to rule and inspire their fellows: and the heroic temper of the man is in England less rare than the consummate

perfection of art which has eternalized its utterance. This is Milton : and, though we may be too weak to read him often, we shall never be able to do without him, never think of him without an added strength and exaltation of spirit.

CHAPTER II

MILTON'S LIFE AND CHARACTER

WE know far more about Milton than about any other English poet born so long ago. There are three reasons for this. One is that from his earliest years he was very much interested in himself, was quite aware that he was a man above the stature of ordinary men, and had the most deliberate intention and expectation of doing great things. Consequently he is not only, like most good poets, fond of bringing more or less concealed autobiography into his poetry, but still more in his prose works he inclines often to insert long passages about himself, his studies, travels, projects, friends and character. It is these more than anything else which now keep those works alive : and, coming from a man so proudly truthful as Milton evidently was, they are of the greatest interest and value. The second reason why we know so much about him is that he played an active part in politics, a far more certain way of

attracting contemporary attention in England than writing *Hamlet* or building St. Paul's Cathedral. And the third is that his life has been made the subject of perhaps the most minute and elaborate biography in the language. Mr. Masson's labours enable us to know, if we choose, every fact, however insignificant, which the most laborious investigation can discover, not only about Milton himself but, one may almost say, about everybody who was ever for five minutes in Milton's company.

From this mass of material, all that can be touched here is a few of the most salient facts of the life and the most striking features of the character.

Milton's life is naturally divided into three periods. The first is that of his education and early poems. It extends from his birth in 1608 to his return from his foreign travels in 1639. The second is that of his political activity, and extends from 1639 to the Restoration. The third is that of *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson*. It concludes with his death, on November 8, 1674.

Milton was born on December 9, 1608, at a house in Bread Street, Cheapside. The house is gone, but the street is a very short one, and it is still pleasant to step out of the

roar of Cheapside into its quietness, and think that there, on the left, close by, under the shadow of Bow Church, was born the greatest poet to whom the greatest city of the modern world has given birth. London ought to hold fast to the honour of Milton, for his honour is peculiarly hers. He was not only born a Londoner but lived in London nearly all his life. And his mind is throughout that of the citizen. Neither agriculture nor sport means much to him; and, much as he loves the sights and sounds of the open country, his allusions to them are those of the delighted but still wondering alien, not those of the native. None is more often quoted than the passage in the ninth book of *Paradise Lost*—

“ As one who, long in populous city pent,
Where houses thick and sewers annoy the
 air,
Forth issuing on a summer's morn, to
 breathe
Among the pleasant villages and farms
Adjoined, from each thing met conceives
 delight—
The smell of grain, or tedded grass, or kine,
Or dairy, each rural sight, each rural sound—
If chance with nymph-like step fair virgin
 pass,
What pleasing seemed for her now pleases
 more,
She most, and in her look sums all delight.”

And the secret of its charm obviously lies partly in the note of a personal experience. Just in that way must Milton, as boy and man, have often issued forth from the weariness of his studies and the noise and confinement of the streets, for a walk among the open fields that then lay so close at hand for the Londoner. And perhaps, as the inhabitants of towns often do, he took a pleasure in the very hedgerows unknown to those who saw them every day. The present Poet Laureate, who has spent most of his life in the country, has asked a question to which it is not easy for the countryman to give the answer he would like—

“ Whose spirit leaps more high,
Plucking the pale primrose,
Than his whose feet must fly
The pasture where it grows? ”

If the town-dweller never attains to that mystical communion with the secret soul of Nature which Wordsworth and such as Wordsworth owe to a life spent in the “ temple’s inmost shrine,” yet his eye, undulled by familiarity, commonly sees more in trees and flowers than the eyes of nearly all those who live every day among them. At its highest familiarity breeds intimacy, but more often what it breeds is indifference. A man who

reads the Bible for the first time in middle life will never live inside it as some saints have lived; but he will see much that is hidden from most of those who have been reading it every day since they could read at all.

Milton remained in London, so far as we know, for the first sixteen years of his life. He was educated at St. Paul's School by a private tutor, one Thomas Young, who was later a conspicuous Presbyterian figure, and by his father, to whom he owed far more than to any one except himself. The elder John Milton was a remarkable man. He had, to begin with, deserted the religious views of his family and taken a line of his own, a course which may not always indicate wisdom, but always indicates force of character. The poet's grandfather, who lived in the Oxford country, had adhered very definitely to Roman Catholicism and is said to have cast off his son for becoming a Protestant and something of a Puritan. The son went to London, set up in business as a scrivener, that is, as something like a modern solicitor, and prospered so much that by 1632 he was able to retire and live in the country. He had considerable musical talents, and his compositions are found in collections of tunes to which such

men as Morley, Dowland and Orlando Gibbons contributed. His house was no doubt full of music, as were, indeed, many others in that most musical of English centuries, and it must have been primarily to him that the poet owed the intense delight in music which appears in all his works. No poet speaks of music so often, and none in his poetry so often suggests that art. The untaught music of lark or nightingale he has not; but no poet has so much of the music which is one of the most consciously elaborate of those arts by which man expresses at once his senses, his mind and his soul.

In the spring of 1625, just a month or two after the accession of the king whose tragical fate was to be the original source of Milton's European fame and very nearly the cause of his mounting a scaffold himself, the future author of *Paradise Lost* went into residence at Cambridge where he remained for seven years. The college that can boast his name among its members is Christ's. Unlike so many poets he had a successful university career, took the ordinary degrees, and evidently made an impression on his contemporaries. No doubt the strong natural bias to a studious life which he had from a child made him apter for university discipline

than is usually the case with genius. From the beginning he had the passion of the student. He says of himself that from his twelfth year he scarce ever went to bed before midnight; and Aubrey reports much the same and says that his father "ordered the maid to sit up for him." And his studies were in the main the accepted studies of the time, not, like Shelley's, a defiance of them. All through his life he had a scholar's respect for learning, and for the great tradition of literature which it is the true business of scholarship to maintain. Radical and rebel as he was in politics and theology, contemptuous of law, custom and precedent, he was always the exact opposite in his art. There he never attempted the method of the *tabula rasa*, or clean slate, which made his political pamphlets so barren. The greatest of all proofs of the strength of his individuality is that it so entirely dominates the vast store of learning and association with which his poetry is loaded. Such a man will at least give his university a chance; and, though Milton did not in later life look back on Cambridge with great affection or respect, there can be no doubt that the seven years he spent within the walls of a college were far from useless to the poet who more than any other

was to make learning serve the purposes of poetry.

So strong, self-reliant and proudly virtuous a nature was not likely to be altogether popular either with the authorities or with his companions. Nor was he, at any rate at first. He had some difference with his tutor, had to leave Cambridge for a time, and is alleged, on very doubtful evidence, to have been flogged. But, whatever his fault was, it was nothing that he was ashamed of, for he publicly alluded to the affair in his Latin poems, and was never afraid to challenge inquiry into his Cambridge career. Nor did it injure him permanently with the authorities. He took his degrees at the earliest possible dates, and ten years after he left Cambridge was able to write publicly and gratefully of "the more than ordinary respect which I found, above many of my equals, at the hands of those courteous and learned men, the Fellows of that college wherein I spent some years : who, at my parting after I had taken two degrees, as the manner is, signified many ways how much better it would content them that I would stay : as by many letters full of kindness and loving respect, both before that time and long after, I was assured of their singular good affection towards me." The

Fellows were no doubt clerical dons of the ordinary sort : indeed, we know they were ; but they could not have Milton among them for seven years without discovering that he was something above the ordinary undergraduate. Wood, who died in 1695 and therefore writes as a contemporary, says of Milton that while at Cambridge he was “esteemed to be a virtuous and sober person yet not to be ignorant of his own parts.” Such young men may not be popular, but if they have the real thing in them they soon compel respect. By the undergraduates Milton was called “The Lady of Christ’s.” And it is plain, from his own references to this nickname in a Prolusion delivered in the college, that he owed it not only to his fair complexion, short stature and great personal beauty, but also to the purity, delicacy and refinement of his manners. He contemptuously asks the audience who had given him the nickname whether the name of manhood was to be confined to those who could drain great tankards of ale or to peasants whose hands were hard with holding the plough. He disdains the implied charge of prudery, and indeed his language is what could not have been used by an effeminate or a coward. No braver man ever held a pen. Wood says

that "his deportment was affable, his gait erect, bespeaking courage and undauntedness," and he himself tells us that "he did not neglect daily practice with his sword," and that "when armed with it, as he generally was, he was in the habit of thinking himself quite a match for any one and of being perfectly at ease as to any injury that any one could offer him." Evidently he owed his title of "Lady" to no weakness, but to a disgust at the coarse and barbarous amusements then common at the universities. He says of himself that he had no faculty for "festivities and jests," as indeed was to be witnessed by all his writings. The witticisms, if such they can be called, which occur in his poetry and oftener in his prose are akin to what are now called practical jokes, that is jokes made by the bodies of those whose minds are not capable of joking. This was partly the common fault of an age whose jests, as may be seen sometimes even in Shakspeare, appear to us to alternate between the merely obvious, the merely verbal, and the merely barbarous; but it was partly also the peculiar temperament of Milton, whose sense of humour, like that of many learned and serious men, was so sluggish that it could only be moved by a very violent stimulus.

But in the main with Milton there was no question of jests, good or bad. It is evident from his own proud confessions that he was always intensely serious, at least from his Cambridge days, always conscious of the greatness of life's issues, always uplifted with the noblest sort of ambition. He says of himself that, however he might admire the art of Ovid and poets of Ovid's sort, he soon learnt to dislike their morals and turned from them to the "sublime and pure thoughts" of Petrarch and Dante. And his "reasonings, together with a certain niceness of nature, an honest haughtiness, and self-esteem either of what I was or what I might be (which let envy call pride) . . . kept me still above those low descents of mind beneath which he must deject and plunge himself that can agree to saleable and unlawful prostitutions." And in repudiating an impudently false charge against his own character he boldly announces a doctrine far above his own age, one, indeed, to which ours has not yet attained. "Having had the doctrine of Holy Scripture unfolding these chaste and high mysteries with timeliest care infused that 'the body is for the Lord and the Lord for the body,' thus also I argued to myself,—that, if unchastity in a woman, whom St. Paul terms the glory of man, be

such a scandal and dishonour, then certainly in a man, who is both the image and glory of God, it must, though commonly not so thought, be much more deflowering and dishonourable. . . . Thus large I have purposely been that, if I have been justly taxed with this crime, it may come upon me after all this my confession with a tenfold shame."

Such was the man from the first, severe with others and with himself, conscious, almost from boyhood, in his own famous words, that "he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things ought himself to be a true poem"; a somewhat strange figure, no doubt, among the tavern-haunting undergraduates of the seventeenth century, a stranger still to be honoured, a hundred and fifty years later, in the rooms which then and now were remembered as his, by the single act of drunkenness in the long and virtuous life of Wordsworth. When he left the university in 1632 Milton had conquered respect, though probably not popularity. The tone of the sixth of the academic Orations, which he delivered at Cambridge and allowed to be published in his old age, shows that, being still aware that he was not popular, he was surprised and pleased at the applause with which a previous discourse of

his had been received and at the large gathering which had crowded to hear the one he was delivering. He says that "nearly the whole flower of the university" was present; and, after allowing for compliments, it is plain that only a man whose name aroused expectations could draw an audience which could be so described without obvious absurdity.

We may well then believe that there is no great exaggeration in his nephew's statement, substantially confirmed as it is by other evidence, that when Milton left Cambridge in 1632 he was already "loved and admired by the whole university, particularly by the Fellows and most ingenious persons of his House." He had, as Wood says, "performed the collegiate and academical exercises to the admiration of all." The power of his mind, the grave strength of his character, could not but be plain to all who had come into close contact with him, and even for those who had not he was a man who had distinction plainly written on his face. It is possible, even, that he was already known as a poet. Before he left Cambridge he had written several of the poems which we still read in his works: the beautiful stanzas *On the Death of a Fair Infant*, so like and so unlike the early poems of Shakspeare, the noble *Ode*

on the Nativity begun probably on Christmas Day 1629, though this is not certain; the pretty little *Song on May Morning* which one likes to fancy having been sung at some such Cambridge greeting of the rising May Day sun as those which are still performed on Magdalen Tower at Oxford; certainly the remarkable lines which are his tribute to Shakspeare: certainly also the beautiful *Epitaph on the Marchioness of Winchester*; and, to mention no more, the autobiographical sonnet on attaining the age of twenty-three. None of these except the lines on Shakspeare are known to have been published before they appeared in the volume of Milton's poems issued in 1645. But the fact that those lines were printed, though without Milton's name, among the commendatory verses prefixed to the 1632 Folio Edition of Shakspeare, may imply that Milton was already known as a young poet. There is also a story that the poem on the death of Lady Winchester was printed in a contemporary Cambridge collection. But whether this were so or not (and no such volume is known to have existed), it seems almost certain that some of Milton's poems would have got known by being passed about in manuscript copies. He himself from the first undervalued nothing he wrote, and was

not afraid to say publicly, in his *Reason of Church Government*, that, from his early youth, it had been found that, "whether aught was imposed me by them that had the overlooking, or betaken to of mine own choice in English or other tongue, prosing or versing, but chiefly this latter, the style, by certain signs it had, was likely to live." He published these bold words in 1641, when he had given no public proof at all of their truth. Such a man was not likely to be unwilling that his verses should be seen : and in particular such poems as the epitaph on Lady Winchester, whose death aroused much public interest, or the *Ode on the Nativity*, plainly challenging the greatest of his predecessors by its high theme and noble art, are almost sure to have got about and won him some fame.

He had earned distinction, then, and aroused expectation before the end of his university career. But what surprised his contemporaries was that for the next seven or eight years he appeared to do little or nothing to justify the one or fulfil the other. Leaving Cambridge when he was twenty-three, he entered no profession, but lived till he was past twenty-nine in studious retirement at his father's country house at Horton near Windsor. His father, and other friends, very

naturally remonstrated at this apparent inactivity. To them all the answer is the same. He cannot now enter the Church, as he had intended, because he would not "subscribe slave" and take oaths that he could not keep. He is not surrendering himself to "the endless delight of speculation," or to the pleasure of "dreaming away his years in the arms of studious retirement." No; he has other things in view than these: but for their performance he demands time for himself and patience from his friends: his own thought is not of being early or late but of being fit. And the work for which he is preparing is in his own mind a settled thing. It is literature, poetry, and, in particular, as will soon appear more definitely, a great poem to take its place among the great poems of the world.

The writing of poetry has never been a recognized and seldom a lucrative profession. Most poets, like other artists, have had to face family opposition and the danger of poverty in obeying their inward call. In this matter Milton is one of the great exceptions. Many poets have had fathers as rich as his, but it would not be easy to find one who resigned himself so cheerfully to the prospect of having a poetic son. The elder Milton was, however, as we have seen, no ordinary man. His sense

of the value of the things of the mind was almost as great as his faith in his son and far greater than his ambition for his son's visible success in the eyes of the world. He had naturally hoped that that son's evident abilities would be exhibited in the ordinary course in a recognized profession; and he evidently made some protest against the apparently objectless studies which, even after leaving Cambridge, Milton seemed to regard as his sole business in life. The record of this survives in the Latin poem *Ad Patrem* which is plainly a reply to some such remonstrance. It is an appeal, and one of very confident tone, to his father not to scorn the Muses to whom he himself owes his own great musical gifts. Why should he, a musician, be astonished to find that his son is a poet? Poetry more than any of man's other gifts is the proof of his divine origin: music and poetry rank together; may it not be that he and his father have divided between them the two great gifts of Apollo?

“Dividuumque Deum genitorque puerque
tenemus.”

The poem rings with the scorn of wealth, from which one must suppose that the old man of business had pointed out that the

scholar's life was not usually lived under the smiles of Fortune. How can you, of all men, replies his son, ask me to care much for that? You trained me from the first for learning, not for the City or the Bar; the father who had his son taught not only Latin, but Greek and Hebrew, French and Italian, astronomy and physical science, cannot ask him to regard money making as the object of life. I have chosen a better part than that: and you were the inspirer of my choice. And I know that at heart you agree with it and share it.

The poem is one of the most interesting of Milton's Latin poems, being rather less affected than most of them by that artificiality of classical allusion which is the bane of such productions. So far as we know, it was the last word on its subject. From henceforth no one questioned Milton's right to be a poet and himself. If he ever afterwards deserted his poetic vocation it was at what he believed to be a still higher call. For the present he lived on quietly at Horton, near the Church where his mother's grave may still be seen; walking often, as we may suppose, about that quietly beautiful country washed by the Thames and crowned by Windsor Castle; and sometimes, as we know from his own words, travelling the seventeen or eighteen miles to

London to buy books or learn “ anything new in Mathematics or in Music, in which sciences I then delighted.” Some of these visits to London evidently lasted days or weeks.

The interesting thing about these six years at Horton is that they are the only part of his life during which the least rural of our poets lived continuously in the country. And perhaps we may say that they bore their natural fruit; for it was while he was at Horton that Milton wrote *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, in which he touched rural life and rural scenes with a freshness and directness which he never again equalled. And the most important of the other poems written during these years, *Arcades*, *Comus*, and above all, *Lycidas*, show the same influence. *Arcades* and *Comus* point also to the effect of his visits to London and the musical world : for both of these were written for the music of his friend Henry Lawes, and probably at his suggestion; and, written as they were for entertainments given by members of the noble families of Stanley and Egerton, they show that Milton's plan of life did not involve cutting himself off from the great world, where they must have caused his name to be talked of. His life at Horton was evidently not that of a mere recluse,

forgetting the world outside and forgotten by it. *Arcades* and *Comus*, and still more the wonderful outburst *At a Solemn Music*, are visible links with the cultivated circles of the town, as *Lycidas*, which followed them in 1637 and was printed in 1638 at Cambridge with other poems to the memory of Edward King, is a visible link with his old university.

The mention of the poems of these years, the most delightful that Milton was ever to write, show that the six years spent at Horton were not entirely what he calls them, "a complete holiday spent in reading over the Greek and Latin writers." If he had never written another line, he had written enough by the time he left Horton to give him a place among the very greatest men who have practised the art of poetry in England. When he started abroad in 1638 he must have known, and his father too, that his daring choice had already justified itself. "You ask what I am about, what I am thinking of," he writes to his friend Diodati at the end of the Horton time; "why, with God's help, of immortality." It is the voice of a man who knows he has already done great things but counts them as nothing compared with what he is to do later on.

Man proposes. In 1637 Milton was "plum-

ing his wings " for the very mightiest of poetic flights, for such a poem as would give full scope to his genius and place him among the great poets of the world. But in the result he actually wrote less poetry in the next twenty years than he had written in the previous five : less in quantity and far less in quality and importance. The first interruption was the completion of his elaborate education by a grand tour. His generous father, who was well-to-do rather than rich, had acquiesced in his not so far earning one penny for himself, and was now prepared to provide him with about a thousand pounds of our present money to enable him to go abroad for a year or two in comfortable style and with the attendance of a servant. Leaving England in the spring of 1638, he spent a few days in Paris, where he was civilly entertained by the famous Grotius, then Swedish Ambassador there, as well as by the English Ambassador, Lord Scudamore, but soon moved south, entering Italy by Nice and Genoa and arriving at Florence in August or September. There he spent two months, and was enthusiastically received by the various academies or clubs of men of letters which then flourished in Florence, one of whose still existing minute

books records that at its meeting on September the 16th a certain John Milton, an Englishman, read to the members a Latin hexameter poem showing great learning. There also he paid his famous visit to Galileo, now old and blind, and still a sort of nominal prisoner of the Inquisition, for the sin, as Milton says in the *Areopagitica*, of "thinking in Astronomy otherwise than the Franciscan and Dominican licensers thought." One may be sure that it was not merely the interest of the new theory about the motion of the earth which drew him back so often to that question in *Paradise Lost*. The blind astronomer, whose scientific heresies had placed him in some danger of the thumbscrew, must have been a very near and moving memory to the blind poet whose political and ecclesiastical heresies had so nearly brought him to the gallows.

From Florence Milton went on to Rome, where his scholarly tastes gratified themselves for two months in the study of what remained of the ancient city. The famous picture of Rome in *Paradise Regained* may owe something to these weeks. There, too, he was well received by several of Rome's most distinguished scholars who paid him compliments of Italian extravagance. There, too, he heard the famous Leonora Baroni

sing, and was so moved as to write three Latin epigrams in her praise. But it was at Naples, whither he passed on before winter, that he made the acquaintance which, except that of Galileo, is the most interesting his Italian tour brought him. It was that of the Neopolitan patrician, Giovanni Manso, who had been intimate with Tasso and Marini and had been celebrated by Tasso in the *Gerusalemme Conquistata*. His courtesy to a foreigner was soon to procure him a still greater honour; for before leaving Naples Milton addressed to him a Latin poem thanking him for his kindness, speaking openly of his own poetic ambitions and praying that, if he lives to write the great Arthurian Epic which he was then planning, he may find such a friend as Tasso found to welcome his poem, comfort his old age and cherish his fame. The only difficulty which separated Manso and Milton was that of religion, where Milton's unguarded frankness embarrassed his host. So, when he abandoned his intended tour in Greece because he thought it "base" to be "travelling abroad at ease for intellectual culture while his fellow-countrymen were fighting at home for liberty," he was warned that the Jesuits at Rome had their eyes on him. But he stayed there two

months nevertheless, fearlessly keeping his resolution, not indeed to introduce or invite religious controversy but, if questioned, then, as he says, "whatsoever I should suffer to dissemble nothing." By February he was again in Florence; and after visits to Bologna, Ferrara and Venice, whence he characteristically shipped "a chest or two of choice music books" for England, he crossed the Alps, spent a week or two at Geneva and in France, and was at home by August 1639.

The elaborate education was now formally complete; and what ordinary men call practical life was at last to begin for Milton. Now for the first time he had an abode of his own, a lodging in St. Bride's, Fleet Street, and soon afterwards a house in Aldersgate Street where he settled with a young nephew whom he undertook to educate. But the real work which he had in view was that of a poet, not of a schoolmaster. The high expectations which he knew he had excited among Italian men of letters had reinforced those of his English friends; and he was now more than ever inclined to follow that "inward prompting which now grew daily upon me that by labour and intent study (which I take to be my portion in this life), joined with the strong propensity of nature, I might per-

haps leave something so written to aftertimes as they should not willingly let it die." So, as his extant notes show, he was weighing a large number of subjects for the great poem, slowly settling on a Biblical one, and indeed on that of the Fall of Man, and perhaps writing some earliest lines of what we now know as *Paradise Lost*.

But in November 1640 occurred an event which governed Milton's life for the next twenty years. The Long Parliament met, and, from that time forward till its final meeting in 1660 to dissolve itself and prepare the way for Charles II, politics were the dominant interest of Milton's mind. It is his age of prose; during it he wrote very little verse of any kind, and none of importance except the finer of his eighteen Sonnets which nearly all belong to these years. On the other hand, most of his prose works were written between 1640 and 1660. Of these it is enough to say that they are perhaps the most curious of all illustrations of the great things which a poet alone can bring to prose and of the dangers which he runs in bringing them. A poet of the stature of Milton is ready at all times to catch all kinds of fire, not only the fires of faith and zeal and enthusiasm, but also, as a rule, those of a scorn

that knows no limit and a hatred that knows no mercy. Such a man needs a strongly made vessel to control his boiling ardours. Prose is not such a vessel : and they too often overflow from it in extravagance and violence. Poetry in all its severer forms places a restraint upon the poet from which as the mood of art gains upon him he has no desire to escape. Law and limitation, willing obedience to the prescribed conditions, are of the very essence of art. And this is as true of the greatest of the arts as of any other. It is not merely that the poet accepts the bondage of rhymes, or stanzas, or numbered syllables, as the painter accepts those of a flat canvas and the sculptor those of bronze or marble; it is that they all alike submit to the mood of art which is always universal and eternal as well as individual and temporal and therefore disdains such crudities of personal violence as are to be found everywhere in Milton's prose and nowhere in his poetry.

But if a poet's prose has its inevitable disadvantages it has also some great qualities which only a poet can supply. In 1640 Milton plunged into a great struggle in which his attitude throughout was that of an angry and contemptuous partisan. And his pamphlets exhibit all the distortion of facts, in-

justice to opponents, and narrowness of view which are the inevitable if often unconscious vices of the man who writes in the interest of a party. But they also contain flights of noble eloquence, in which, as in the passage about the City of London in the *Areopagitica*, the soul of partisanship has undergone a fiery purification and emerges free of all its grosser elements, a pure essence of zeal and faith and spiritual vision.

The first stage of the struggle was largely ecclesiastical, and Milton plunged into it with five pamphlets in 1641 and 1642, fiercely demanding the abolition of Episcopacy and the establishment of a Presbyterian system in England. Fortunately for himself, as he was soon to see, the views he advocated did not in the end prevail. For the next step he took in the way of pamphlet writing would assuredly have got him into difficulties with any possible kind of ecclesiastical jurisdiction, whether after the model of Laud or of Calvin. It grew out of the most important and disastrous event in the whole of his private life. In the spring of 1643 he went into Oxfordshire, from which county his father had originally come, and, to the surprise of his friends, who knew nothing of his intention, returned a married man. His wife was one

Mary Powell, the daughter of a Justice of the Peace at Forest Hill, near Oxford. The Powell family owed the Milton family five hundred pounds, which may have been the poet's introduction to them. If so, the marriage to which it led had the results that might be expected from such a beginning. The war had then already begun, the King was at Oxford and the Powells were Cavaliers; so that when Mrs. Milton, who had been accompanied to London by her relations, was to be left alone with a husband of twice her age, and of severe tastes, she shrank from the prospect, got away on a visit to her family and did not return till 1645, by which time the King was ruined and with him the Powells.

When Shelley deserted his wife he wrote to her asking her to come and live with him and the lady who had supplanted her. When Milton's wife deserted him he wrote a series of pamphlets advocating divorce at the will of the husband. Such are the extravagances of those whose eyes are so accustomed to a brighter light that when brought into that of common day they see nothing, and make mistakes which are justly ridiculous to the children of this world. It is an old story: Plato's philosopher in the cave, the saint in politics, the modern poet in the world of war,

commerce, or industry: the eye that sees heaven often blunders on earth. Milton's divorce pamphlets, like nearly all his controversial writings, have three fatal defects. They are utterly blind to the temper of those to whom they were addressed, to the reasonable arguments of opponents, and to the practical difficulties inherent in their proposals. He argues that, as the law gives relief to a man whose wife disappoints him of the physical end of marriage, it is an outrage that he should have none when deprived of the social and intellectual companionship which is its moral end. But he takes no note of the awkward fact that the dismissed wife is not and cannot be in the same position as she was before her marriage. Nor does he give the wife any corresponding rights to get rid of her husband. These, and a hundred other difficulties all too visible to duller eyes, he utterly ignores as he proceeds on his violent way of deliverance from what he calls "imaginary and scarecrow sins." Nothing is allowed to stand in his path. For instance, the awkward texts in the Bible, whose authority he accepts, are given new interpretations with which it is to be feared his temper had more to do than his knowledge of the meaning of Greek words. But

there is not a hint of his own case in all he says, and it is not desertion that he discusses but incompatibility of temper. Masson even sees reason to think that he began the first pamphlet before his wife left him, but when, no doubt, her unfitness to be his wife was only too evident. However all that may be, we can only think with wondering pity of those summer weeks of 1643 and of the two years which followed. Everything in Milton's life and writings shows him a man unusually susceptible to the attraction of women, one whose love was of that strongest sort which is built on a chastity born not of coldness but of purity and self-control. Such a man, in such a plight, with the added misery of knowing that he owed it to his own rash folly, may be pardoned for forgetting the true bearing of his own doctrine that laws are made for the "common lump of men." Cases like his are the real tragedies, the tragedies of life so much more bitter than the more visible ones of death; and no thinking or feeling man will lightly decide that they must remain unrelieved. But neither Milton nor any of his successors must look at the problem from his own point of view alone. Laws are made, and ought to be, as he himself says, for the "lump of men"; and the wisdom or

unwisdom of facilities for divorce must be judged, not merely by the relief they afford in unhappy marriages, but also by the danger of disturbance they produce in the far more numerous marriages which, though experiencing their days of doubt or difficulty, are on the whole happy or at least not unhappy. Perhaps Milton himself might have hesitated if he could have foreseen the consequences of an application of his theories. Modern divorce laws have filled our newspapers with just that "clamouring debate of utterless things" which he dreaded and abhorred, while few will argue that they have increased the number of unions which answer to his conception of "the true intent of marriage."

After all, Milton's own story illustrates the advantages of putting delays and difficulties in the way of divorce. According to his nephew he had planned to act upon his principles and marry "a very handsome and witty gentlewoman"; but the lady had more regard than he to the world's opinion. And she did Milton a service by her reluctance. For the rumour of her, helped by their own misfortunes, brought the Powells to their senses; and with the help of Milton's friends they managed the well-known scene at a room in St. Martin's the Grand, in which he was

surprised by the sight of his wife on her knees before him.

“ Soon his heart relented
Towards her, his life so late, and sole delight,
Now at his feet submissive in distress.”

So he glances back at the scene twenty years later when he was drawing to the close of his great poem. Meanwhile he received back his wife, who bore him three daughters and died in 1653 or 1654. He was to marry again in 1656; but this second wife, the “ espoused saint ” of his sonnet, lived little more than a year; and in 1663 he married his third wife who long survived him. But to return to the house in the Barbican, to which he removed with his wife in 1645. With him there were also his father, two nephews and other boys whom it was his principal occupation to teach. It is somewhat surprising that he found pupils, as his views on the divorce question had naturally caused scandal in all quarters and received little support in any. He could now see that the Presbyterian Church discipline which he had advocated so eagerly in his first pamphlets might have its inconveniences; the elders of an English kirk would be no more merciful than his detested bishops to such freedom of thought, speech and action as he now demanded.

From henceforth he is an Independent and more than an Independent; for he was attached to no congregation, apparently attended no church regularly, and maintained that profoundly religious temper which is even more visible in his last works than in his first without the support of any authority, creed or companionship in prayer. With these views growing upon him it was natural that, when the struggle came between the Presbyterian Parliament and the Independent Army, he had no hesitation in supporting the Army; nor is it surprising that such a man of no compromise as he had shown himself to be was ready to come forward, even before the deed was done, with a defence of the execution of Charles I. It is in connection with that event that his name first became known to all Europe and was soon so famous that foreigners visiting England desired to see two men above all others, Oliver Cromwell and John Milton. This Milton, from henceforth a European celebrity, was not the author of *Paradise Lost* which was not yet written, nor of his earlier poems which were little known in England and quite unknown elsewhere. He was the apologist of the Regicides, the Foreign Secretary of the world-famed Protector.

For the next eleven years, from 1649 to 1660, Milton had a public and official as well as a private life. Charles was executed on January 30, 1649. Within a few days after appeared Milton's *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, largely written, of course, before the execution, and justifying it and all the other proceedings of the Army without any hesitation or compromise. It has some breathings of the Miltonic grandeur; but that is all. For the rest it is a mere party polemic written for the moment; and, as is the case with all pamphlets, the very qualities which gave it its contemporary interest make it unreadable to posterity. Part of it is a sweeping assertion of the inalienable right of the whole people to choose, judge and depose their rulers; a democratic doctrine which a few years later, when England had grown tired of the Army and the Puritans, he was to find as inconvenient as he had already found his early advocacy of the Presbyterian system in matters ecclesiastical. For the moment, however, the pamphlet made him a person of importance. Such a man, learned, eloquent, of high character, of visible sincerity, of utter fearlessness, was not an ally to be despised by a Government which had outraged public opinion at home and abroad. Within a few

weeks he was appointed Secretary for Foreign Tongues to the Council of State; and from henceforth till after the death of Cromwell he wrote the weightiest of the vindications, remonstrances and authoritative demands which the great Protector addressed to an astonished and overawed Europe. We can read them still. Many are insignificant, dealing with petty personal details; but the best, especially those that deal with the universal cause of Protestantism and freedom, rise on spiritual wings far above the language of diplomacy and officialism, letting us hear the authentic voice of Milton preluding the thunders of Cromwell and Blake.

But the first important work required of Milton belonged rather to the man of letters than to the Foreign Secretary. The horror aroused both at home and abroad by the execution of Charles, already great enough in itself to be very inconvenient to the Government, was greatly increased by the publication of a book called *Eikon Basilike* which purported to be the work of the king himself and appeared immediately after his death. It is a kind of religious portrait of Charles, reporting his spiritual meditations and containing a justification of his life. Its success was prodigious; fifty editions are said

to have appeared within a year. It was obviously necessary that some reply should be attempted; and the task was naturally assigned to Milton, who published his *Eikonoklastes*, or Image-Breaker, in October. It is a mere pamphlet, even more violent than the *Tenure of Kings*, not ashamed to rake up such absurdities as the alleged poisoning of James I by Buckingham, with the usual Miltonic inconsistencies, such as that which denounces Charles for the crime of refusing his consent to bills passed by Parliament and forgets that the Government on whose behalf he is writing established itself by a forcible suppression of the Parliamentary majority. It survives now only by the curious passage in it which tells us that William Shakspeare was "the closet companion" of Charles I in the "solitudes" of the end of his life; and by the puritanical allusion to the "vain amatorious poem of Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*" from which, however "full of worth and wit" in its own kind, it was a disgrace to the king to borrow a prayer at so grave an hour. Perhaps as a mark of their approval of *Eikonoklastes*, the Council of State gave Milton lodgings in Whitehall; and soon afterwards, in January 1650, called upon him to reply to another Royalist book which was making a

great stir. The result was the beginning of a political and personal controversy which lasted almost as long as it was safe for Milton to write about politics at all.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries great scholars had a position which they are never likely to occupy again. In those cosmopolitan days when an Italian governed France, and regiments and even armies were often commanded by foreigners, the honour of possessing a celebrated scholar was eagerly disputed not only by universities, but by cities, sovereign states, and even kings. Learning had then a market value in the world: for then, as always, especially since the invention of printing, European opinion was worth having on one's side; and in the days before journalism the practice was to hire distinguished scholars to write to a political brief. After the death of Charles I it was obviously the policy of Charles II to secure support by a powerful indictment of the iniquity of the rulers of the English Commonwealth. For this purpose his advisers obtained the services of a certain Claude de Saumaise, or, as he was generally called, Salmasius. This man, forgotten now except for Milton, was then a scholar of such fame that his presence was disputed between Oxford

and Venice, the French and the Dutch, between the Pope who wanted him at Rome and Christina of Sweden who was soon to persuade him to go to Stockholm. So it is not altogether surprising that Charles II was advised to pay him, and perhaps paid him, much more than he could afford for writing a book called *Defensio Regia*, which was to be before all Europe the public statement of the case against the new rulers of England. Milton spent a year in preparing his reply, which came out in the beginning of 1651. The *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio* is now pleasanter reading for Milton's detractors than for those who honour his name. The unbridled insults which it heaps upon Charles I and still more upon Salmasius, for whom its least offensive titles are such as "blockhead," "liar" and "apostate," exceed even the wide limits of abuse customary in these days. *Corruptio optimi pessima*: such a man as Milton, if he once descends to the bandying of foul language, will beat the very bargemen themselves. But what astonished his contemporaries was not his violence but his courage. An unknown Englishman had dared to meet the giant of learning on his own ground and had at least held his own. It may have been partly as the result of this

that Salmasius no longer found Holland a pleasant place of residence and removed to Sweden. A more certain result is that the English David who had stood up to Goliath was from henceforth a European celebrity. With his usual proud courage he had put his own name on the title-page of his book, challenging to himself both the glories and the dangers that might come of it. He was not to be disappointed of either.

From henceforth he was in the thick of a violent controversy, which made so much more noise than it deserved in its own day that it need make none here. Replies came out both to his *Eikonoklastes* and to his *Defensio*: new books grew out of the controversy; Milton's nephew wrote on his behalf, and anonymous friends of Salmasius on his; the adversaries of Milton no more spared his character than he had spared theirs; a *Defensio Secunda* from his own hand seemed necessary, and appeared in 1654; and so with minor pamphlets and second editions we get on to the end of the weary controversy, in which for contemporaries there was perhaps some fire and light, but for us now little but smoke and darkness of confusion.

Such was the work which was Milton's chief occupation during the Commonwealth, to the

doing of which he deliberately sacrificed his eyesight. Within a year after the publication of his book against Salmasius its foreseen result was complete. From henceforth Milton was dependent upon the eyes of others. He was only forty-four when overtaken by this calamity. Yet his courage seems never to have failed him. "I argue not," he tells Cyriack Skinner in his sonnet—

“ Against Heaven’s hand or will, nor bate a
 jot
 Of heart or hope, but still bear up and
 steer
 Right onward. What supports me, dost
 thou ask?
 The conscience, friend, to have lost them
 overplied
 In Liberty’s defence, my noble task,
 Of which all Europe rings from side to side.”

Whoever had begun to have doubts about the course taken in 1649 and since, he had none; and no one had suffered more in defence of it. The other and greater sonnet on his blindness—

“ When I consider how my light is spent
 Ere half my days in this dark world and
 wide ”

shows him content if need be to take his place among those whose desire to serve

God must find its peace in the thought that

“ They also serve who only stand and wait.”

In the same spirit, perhaps, is the motto which he appended to his signature in the album of a learned foreigner in 1651 : “ I am made perfect in weakness.” But nothing of weakness, not even its perfection, could ever come near Milton. He played a greater part in this world without his eyes than ever he had played with them. Without their help he did what prose could do towards justifying the ways of England to Europe, and was very soon to do what verse could do towards justifying the ways of God to men. He cannot, perhaps, be said to have succeeded in either, but one at least of the failures is a whole heaven above what ordinary men call success.

A few words may be said of his attitude towards men and measures during this political period of his life. His unqualified and immediate support of the King's execution had, of course, united him with the Cromwellian party who had brought it about. And his anti-Presbyterian views carried him in the same direction. So we are not surprised to find that, when Cromwell got rid of the Parliament by military force and soon after-

wards became Protector, Milton approved his action and gladly continued to serve under him. Nor was Milton the man to be disturbed by the Protector's rapid dissolution of his first Parliament, by the period of personal Government which followed, or by his angry breach with his second Parliament. Poets have seldom understood politics, and Milton, the most political of poets, perhaps less than any. No man ever had less of that sense of law and custom, of the need of continuity, which is the very centre and secret of politics. Few great statesmen have been able to maintain perfect consistency; but the least consistent have generally been aware that there was something in inconsistencies that needed explanation. Milton never shows any consciousness of the patent incongruity between his early exaltation of the indefeasible rights of Parliaments and his support of the Cromwellian attitude towards them: between his angry denunciation of Charles I for presuming to retain the ancient right of the kings to refuse their assent to Bills submitted to them and his approval of Cromwell's dismissal of a Parliament for attempting to deny the same right to the Protector: between the extreme doctrine of free printing claimed in the *Areopagitica* and the fact that its author

was afterwards concerned in licensing books under a Government which vigorously suppressed "seditious" publications. But inconsistencies by themselves are of little importance, particularly in revolutionary times; they would be of none, in Milton's case, if he had ever admitted that he had learnt from experience and consequently changed his mind. But he never did. Parliaments remained sacred when they were for pulling down bishops, profane when they were for establishing Presbyterianism, and utterly detestable when they were for restoring Charles II. The fact is, of course, that Milton, like most men of much imagination and no political experience, saw a vision of certain things in the value of which he believed with all his soul, and saw none of the objections to them and none of the difficulties that stood in their way. At the very end, when the bonfires for Charles II were almost lighted in the streets, he could publish *A Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*; and the title he chose for that book was typical of his whole attitude in all practical matters. He had to an extreme degree the man of vision's blindness to the all-important fact that the mass of men would not have what he aims at if they

could and could not if they would. At least in a free country the statesman knows that he has got to work through stupid people, with their consent, and with regard to the measure of their capacities. For such men as Milton stupid people either do not exist or are to be merely ignored. That is his attitude all through. Alike in the matter of divorce and in the matter of education, in the ecclesiastical problem and in the political, he was always eager to put forward a "ready and easy way" which entirely ignored the nature of the human material which was to walk in it. He simply chose not to see that in all these matters men had for centuries been walking in a way which was not his, a way which had in fact by now diverged many miles from his; and that they could not possibly, even if they would, transport themselves in a moment, at a mere wave of his wand, across the intervening bogs and forests which the lapse of years had rendered impassable. He never appears to have had a single glimpse of the truth that the essential business of the statesman is to be always moving from the past to the future without ever letting the bridge between them break down. The principal food of a political people is custom, and to break the bridge is to cut off the only source

of its supply. The greatest proof that Cromwell was really a statesman and not a mere political emergency man of unusual character and ability is that in his last years he was evidently seeing more and more plainly that the right metaphor for a statesman is taken from grafting and not from "root and branch" operations. It is clear that he had seen that political branches may be pruned away but roots can very seldom be safely disturbed; and that among the roots in English politics were a hereditary Monarchy and an established Church. Dynasty and formularies might perhaps be safely changed; but the things themselves were of the root, and the tree would not flourish if they were touched. It is characteristic of Milton that in both these matters he was strongly opposed to the policy towards which Cromwell was feeling his way. Ten years had taught him nothing, and the death of Cromwell found him as blind to political possibilities as the death of Charles I.

One would like to know something of the relations between the two greatest men of the Commonwealth. But there is little or nothing to know. It is plain that in most matters they must have been in close agreement; and in a few, as in the business of the

Piedmont massacres, the two great hearts must have beaten as one, while the sword of Cromwell stood ready drawn behind the trumpet of Milton's noble prose and nobler verse. The only surviving act of personal contact between them is to be found in Milton's sonnet; and that is a public tribute with no suggestion of private intimacy in it. Indeed, as Masson has pointed out, it may easily be taken to mean more than it really does; for it was not written because Milton could not keep silence about his admiration of Cromwell, but rather, as its full title shows, as a petition or appeal to Cromwell to save the nation from parliamentary proposals for the setting up of a State Church and for limiting the toleration of dissent from it. The sonnet, then, proves less than it has sometimes been made to prove; and in any case it proves no intimacy. Perhaps after all, in the case of Milton as in that of most men who deal with public affairs, we are apt to exaggerate the importance in their daily lives of these visible official activities. The world thinks it knows men who fight battles, or make speeches, or write books; but it knows nothing of their private thoughts or studies and still less of their private loves and joys and sorrows which to themselves

and in truth are much the most real part of their lives. So with Milton during these years; his wife and little children may have been, his second wife and such friends as Cyriack Skinner and Henry Lawrence and Lady Ranelagh and the poet Marvell certainly were, much greater realities to him in his daily thoughts than either the hated Salmasius and Morus of the pamphlets or the admired Cromwell of the sonnet. The "weekly table" he is said to have kept, at the expense of the State, for foreign ministers, must have provided interesting talk; but the true Milton cannot have lived in these gatherings so fully at the time or remembered them afterwards so affectionately as those other more intimate parties of which he gives us a picture in the two sonnets to Lawrence and Skinner which, for lovers of poetry, look so pleasantly back to Horace and so pleasantly forward to Cowper and Tennyson.

"Lawrence, of virtuous father virtuous son,
Now that the fields are dank, and ways
are mire,
Where shall we sometimes meet, and by
the fire
Help waste a sullen day, what may be
won
From the hard season gaining? Time will
run

On smoother, till Favonius re-inspire
The frozen earth, and clothe in fresh
attire
The lily and rose, that neither sowed nor
spun.
What neat repast shall feast us, light and
choice,
Of Attic taste, with wine, whence we may
rise
To hear the lute well touched, or artful
voice
Warble immortal notes and Tuscan air?
He who of those delights can judge, and
spare
To interpose them oft, is not unwise."

This is his own graver and older parallel to what his nephew tells us of his schoolmastering days when he would turn from "hard study and spare diet" to "drop once a month or so into the society of some young sparks of his acquaintance," and with them "would so far make bold with his body as now and then to keep a gawdy day." The sonnet shows that the poet is still the poet of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, no narrow fanatic, but a lover of company and the arts, and of the richness and fulness of life. Such occasions as that it describes must have been oases in the desert of controversy and public business abroad and of blindness and loneliness at home. He did not live long in Whitehall,

moving in 1652 to a house overlooking St. James's Park, near what is now Queen Anne's Gate. There his first wife died in 1653, or 1654, and her short-lived successor too; there he lived during the remaining years of the Commonwealth, working at his pamphlets and State papers, even beginning *Paradise Lost*, with young friends to read to him, write for him, lead their blind great man about in the Park or elsewhere, till the catastrophe of 1660 arrived and it was no longer safe for the defender of Regicide to be seen in the streets.

Why Milton was not hanged at the Restoration is still something of a mystery. His name must have been more hatefully known to the returning exiles than that of any one except the dead Cromwell whose death did not save his body from a grim ceremony at Tyburn. He had not only defended Charles I's execution before all Europe, and in a tone almost of exultation, but he had pursued the whole Stuart family with vituperation and contempt. Even in the very last weeks, when the bells were already almost ringing for Charles II, he had dared to raise his voice against the "abjured and detested thralldom of kingship"; declaring that he would not be silent though he should but speak "to trees and stones: and had none to cry to, but

with the prophet 'O Earth, Earth, Earth!' to tell the very soil itself what her perverse inhabitants are deaf to,"—a passage, if interpreted by its original context, of awful imprecation upon Charles I. A man so famous, so utterly unrepentant, so defiant to the very end, seemed to challenge to himself the gallows. That his challenge would receive its natural answer was the openly expressed opinion of his enemies. No doubt it was also the fear of his friends, who concealed him in Smithfield from May till August 1660. By the 24th of August the danger was over. The Act of Indemnity, which was a pardon to all political offenders not by name excepted in it, became law on that day; and Milton's was not one of the excepted names. How was that managed? There are various stories; perhaps each has some truth in it; many influences may have combined. One is that he had saved Davenant in his danger some years before and now the Cavalier poet in his turn saved the Puritan. But Davenant was not in Parliament, and the real work must have been done by a group of friends who were. The most important of them seem to have been Annesley (afterwards Lord Anglesey), Sir Thomas Clarges, who was Monk's brother-in-law, Monk's secretary Morrice, and the poet's less powerful but

still more devoted friend Andrew Marvell. Between them somehow they saved him, aided no doubt by the general pity for a blind man, the general respect for his learning which found expression even in that moment and even in Royalist pamphlets, and, one may hope, by the knowledge of a few of them that this was a man of genius from whom there might be great things yet to come. The names of those who thus made possible the greatest poem in the English language deserve lasting record; and a word of gratitude may be added to Clarendon and to Charles II for refraining from saying the easy and not unnatural word which would have been instantly fatal to their old enemy.

The odd thing is that he was arrested after all. There had been an order of the House of Commons for his arrest and for the burning of his books, possibly, as Masson thinks, obtained by his friends to make it seem unnecessary to except him in the Indemnity Bill. The books were duly burnt, or such copies of them as came to the hands of the hangman; and ultimately, at some uncertain date, Milton himself was got into the custody of the Sergeant-at-Arms. He was soon released, and the story would not be worth relating but for a curious proof it gives of the

obstinate courage of the poet. The House ordered his release on December 15; and one would have supposed that he would have been glad to escape into obscurity and safety again on any terms. But no; the Sergeant-at-Arms demanded high fees which Milton thought unreasonable; and even then, when he had almost felt the hangman's rope on his neck, he would not be bullied by any man. He refused to pay: and though the Solicitor-General ominously remarked that he deserved hanging, his friends got the fees referred to a committee and presumably reduced. Before the beginning of 1661 he was definitely a free man to live his final fourteen years of political defeat, isolation and silence, of unparalleled poetic fertility, and, before the end, of acknowledged poetic fame.

He did not return any more to the fashionable and therefore dangerous neighbourhood of Whitehall, but lived the rest of his life in a succession of houses in or near the city, ending in Artillery Walk, Bunhill Fields, where he died. His friends must for years have feared that he might be attacked and perhaps murdered by some drunken Cavalier revellers accidentally coming across the old regicide. And in spite of the Act of Indemnity he can hardly have felt absolutely comfortable on

the side of the law when so late as 1664 his *Tenure of Kings* was denounced by the censor as still extant and an unfortunate printer was hanged, drawn and quartered for issuing a sort of new version of it. Misfortunes without and fears within might be the summing up, if not of the poet's, at least of the man's life during these first years after the Restoration. To begin with, he was a much poorer man. His salary as Secretary was, of course, gone. But besides that he had lost £2000, equal to about £7000 now, which he had invested in Commonwealth Securities, as well as some confiscated property he had bought of the Chapter of Westminster; and he was soon to lose, at least temporarily, the rent he received from his father's house in Bread Street which was destroyed by the Fire of London. Masson calculates that he was left after the Restoration with an income about equal to £700 of our money which his further losses and outlay on his daughters had reduced to £300 or £350 before his death; not quite poverty even at the end, but something very different from what the eldest son of a rich man had been accustomed to. A graver misfortune was the gout which afflicted him for the rest of his life and gave him so much pain that he made little of his blindness in

comparison with it. Worst of all was his unhappy relation to his daughters. That is the ugliest thing in the story of his life. How things might have gone with his son, if the baby boy had lived, one does not know; but his oriental views of the moral and intellectual inferiority of women, which doubled the dangers of their fascinations, made him certain to be a despotic father to three motherless girls. And so he was. He had plenty of young men eager for the privilege of reading to him : but of course they could not be always with him, and the result was that dreadful picture which comes to us from his nephew, no unfriendly witness, of the daughters "condemned to the performance of reading and exactly pronouncing of all the languages of whatever book he should at one time or other think fit to peruse; viz. the Hebrew (and, I think, the Syriac), the Greek, the Latin, the Italian, Spanish and French," none of which languages they understood. Nor did he show any desire that they should; saying grimly that one tongue was enough for a woman. History and fiction are alike full of the tragedies that result from the blindness of extraordinary minds to ordinary duties; and Milton's case is one of the saddest. The daughters cheated him and made away with

his books; he spoke of them gravely and repeatedly as his "unkind children"; one of them is even reported, on very good evidence, to have said, at his third marriage in 1663, that "that was no news to hear of his wedding but, if she could hear of his death, that was something." At last it was thought better that he and they should part; and they were put out, at considerable expense to their father, to learn embroidery work and other "curious and ingenious manufactures" for their living. It is pleasant to hear that the youngest, Deborah, who was visited by Addison not long before he died, and received fifty guineas from Queen Caroline, was "in a transport" of delight when shown a portrait of her father, crying out "'Tis my father, 'tis my dear father, I see him; 'tis him; 'tis the very man! here, here!" as she pointed to some of the features. So one likes to be told, on her authority, that he was delightful company and "the life of the conversation, full of unaffected cheerfulness and civility" when he had his little parties of friends. And to us, if not to her, it is a pleasant story that she could still repeat many lines from Homer, Euripides and Ovid, though she said she did not understand Greek or Latin. The wife of a Spitalfields weaver must at last have felt

some pride in these survivals of her childish drudgery, proof audible to all men, if to her unintelligible, that she was the daughter of Mr. Milton, the great scholar and poet.

No more need to be said of sorrow or failure. The rest is a serene and productive old age. *Paradise Lost* was published in 1667, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson* in 1671. Besides these there was, in 1673, a new edition of his earlier poems reprinted, with additions from that of 1645; and many publications of prose works mostly written in earlier years but never printed, such as his *History of Britain*, and little books on Education, Logic and Grammar. He kept up his strenuous life of study and composition apparently to the end. He is said to have got up at four or five in the morning, and, after hearing a chapter or two from the Hebrew Bible and breakfasting, to have passed the five hours before his midday dinner dictating or having some book read to him. In the afternoon he would walk a little in his garden; all his life a garden had been one of the things he would not do without. Then music and more private study carried him on to an Horatian supper of olives or other "light things"; and so to a pipe of tobacco, a glass of water and bed. He drank but little wine, and that only with his meals.

Such a way of life deserved a healthful old age, which, but for that healthy man's disease the gout, he had, and a death such as he had, so easy as to be imperceptible to the bystanders. That was on November 8, 1674. Four days later his body was buried in the church of St. Giles, Cripplegate, where his grave may still be seen; the funeral being accompanied by "all his learned and great friends in London, not without a concourse of the vulgar."

By that time the battle of his life had been won. The astonishing achievements of his last years had more than fulfilled the high promise and proud words of his long distant youth. Perhaps no seven years in all literary history provide a finer record of poetic genius triumphing over difficulties external and internal than these last seven of Milton's life from 1667 to 1674. They had their reward and not only from posterity. There is a still lingering delusion, based chiefly on the five pounds paid for the first edition of *Paradise Lost*, that Milton's greatness was little recognized in his lifetime. The truth is the exact reverse. He had far more chance of hearing his own praises, if he cared for that, than most of the great English poets: than Keats and Shelley, for instance; than Wordsworth,

at least till he was old ; nay, in all probability than Shakspeare himself. Which of them heard the most popular poet of their day say of them anything at all like Dryden's famous and generous " This man cuts us all out and the ancients too " ? It is not even true that *Paradise Lost* sold badly. On the contrary, in a year and a half from the day of publication over thirteen hundred copies had been sold, from which the author received £10 and the publisher, it is believed, £50 or £60. He would be a sanguine publisher to-day who would be quite certain of making in eighteen months the modern equivalent of this sum, say £180, out of a new epic, even if it were as great as Milton's.

But the money question was not of the first importance to Milton and is of none to us. The interesting thing is the almost immediate recognition of the greatness of the poem. Nothing in the world could be more alien to the tone of the society and literature of the London of Charles II than this long Biblical Puritan poem with its scarcely veiled attacks on the revived Monarchy and Episcopacy and its entirely unveiled attacks on the fashionable men of Belial. Yet it was from the very high priests of this society that the most unstinted praise came. Of its professional men of

letters Dryden was already rapidly advancing to the unquestioned primacy which was soon to be his, and to remain his for his life; of its amateurs Lord Dorset had perhaps the most brilliant reputation. It was these two men who, more than any others, made the town recognize the greatness of Milton. Both were as unlike Milton as men could be, and Dryden had just committed himself to a strong championship of rhymed verse as against blank. There is nowhere a finer proof of the compelling power of great art upon those who know it when they see it than the unbounded praise with which Dryden at once saluted Milton. The fact that his admiration at first took the absurd form of turning Milton's epic into a "heroic opera" in rhyme does not detract from the significance of his writing publicly within a year of Milton's death that the blind old regicide's poem was "one of the greatest, most noble and sublime which either this age or nation has produced," and to this he was to add, thirteen years later, the still bolder tribute of the well-known epigram about "three poets in three distant ages born" which gives Milton a place above Homer and Virgil. The lines are in detail absurd; but their absurdity does not destroy the fact that the intellectual life of England was never

keener, or more eager to welcome talent in art or letters, than in the reign of Charles II; and nothing is clearer proof of it than the honours received by the rebel Milton from a Court composer like Henry Lawes, a Court physician like Samuel Barrow, a statesman and minister like Lord Anglesey, and a poet laureate like Dryden.

So we may think of him happily enough in these last years. He had now done the work which from his early manhood he had felt it was his task in life to do. When he was not much over thirty he had boldly written in public of what his mind, "in the spacious circuits of her musing, hath liberty to propose to herself, though of highest hope and hardest attempting; whether that epic form whereof the two poems of Homer, and those other two of Virgil and Tasso, are a diffuse and the book of Job a brief model . . . or whether those dramatic constitutions, wherein Sophocles and Euripides reign, shall be found more doctrinal and exemplary to a nation." For the moment nothing seemed to come of these high words; but before he died not one only, but both of his dreams, the drama as well as the epic, were accomplished facts. *Paradise Lost*, begun as a drama, had become the greatest of modern

epics; and the abandoned drama had reappeared in *Samson*, not the greatest of English tragedies, but the one which best recalls the peculiar greatness of the drama of Greece. Self-confident young men have always been common enough, but there are two differences between them and Milton: their performance falls far short of their promise instead of exceeding it; and neither promise nor performance is marked by this exalting and purifying sense of a thing divinely inspired and divinely aided. Such work can wait, as his did, being such as is "not to be raised from the heat of youth or the vapours of wine; like that which flows at waste from the pen of some vulgar amourist, or the trencher fury of a rhyming parasite; nor to be obtained by the invocation of dame memory and her siren daughters, but by devout prayer to that eternal Spirit who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge, and sends out his seraphim, with the hallowed fire of his altar, to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases."

Now the task is done; and he can sit alone in his upstairs room in Artillery Walk and thank God that in spite of blindness, private sorrows and public disappointments, he had been enabled at last to bear the witness of a work of immortal beauty to the high truth

that had been in him even from a boy. So it may have been in the graver moments of solitude; while, as we know from several sources, there were other times, when he would enjoy the companionship of friends and the homage of learned strangers by whom we are told he was "much visited, more than he did desire." The picture suggested to us is that of a man who at sixty-five, then a greater age than now, retained all his powers of mind and much of the physical beauty which had been so remarkable in his youth; who was gracious but somewhat reserved and dignified with strangers; a delightful companion to friends and especially to younger men; full of literature, especially of poetry, and with a memory that enabled him to recite long passages from Homer and Virgil; above all, an ardent lover of music, making a practice, so far as possible, of hearing some, whether vocal or instrumental, every afternoon. His ears were eyes to him; and when he heard a lady sing finely he would say: "Now will I swear this lady is handsome." All kinds of music, and not only the severer, were delightful to the "organ-voice of England."

That is not the least interesting thing about him. The greatest of England's Puritans

was also the greatest of her artists. He had nothing in him of the morbid scrupulosity which is such an inhuman feature in French Jansenism and some of the English sects. His was a large nature which demanded a free expansion of life. Lonely figure as he is in our literary history, with no real predecessors or followers, his mighty arch yet bridges the gulf between Elizabeth and the Revolution, and is of nearer or less distant kin to Shakspeare than to Pope. His prose is the swan song of the old eloquence, as inspired and as confused as an oracle. To read it when it is at its best is to soar on wings through the empyrean and despise Swift and Addison walking in neat politeness on the pavement. There as everywhere, in his verse, in his character, in his mind, in his life, he has the strength and the weakness of an aristocrat. The youth who in his Cambridge days was "esteemcd a virtuous person yet not to be ignorant of his parts" did not belie the opinion formed of him in either of those respects. His Republicanism was of the proud Roman sort, and at least as near Coriolanus as Gracchus; a boundless faith in the State and a boundless desire to spend and be spent in its service, a total and scornful indifference to the opinions of all

those, though they might be five-sixths of the nation, who did not desire to be served in the way which he had decided to be for their good. The modern way of deciding matters of State by counting heads may very likely be the best of many unsatisfactory ways of accomplishing a very difficult business; but it has always been peculiarly exasperating to men of genius who see their way plainly and cannot understand why a million blind men are to keep them out of it. Milton liked the voice of the majority well enough when he could plead it against Charles I; but when he found it calling for Charles II he treated it as a mere impertinent absurdity; the vain babble of a "misguided and abused multitude" with whom wise men have nothing to do except to keep them in their place. And it is in the latter attitude that he is most really himself. His is, of course, an aristocracy of mind and character, not of birth and wealth; but the self-sufficient scorn which was almost a virtue in Aristotle's eyes, and is in ours the besetting sin of even the noblest of aristocrats, is too frequent a note in all his prose, and even in his poetry; and it is sometimes poured out upon those who are fitter subjects for tenderness than for contempt. One can scarcely imagine a child

or an ignorant man being quite at ease in Milton's company.

But these are the penalties that greatness has too often to pay for being itself. So long as we remain human beings and not divine, it will be found hard to unite humility, ease of manner, and the glad sufferance of fools with a mind struggling in a storm of sublime thoughts, with powers that are and know themselves to be far above those of ordinary men. It will never be easy for men of supreme genius to behave to their inferiors as if they were their equals. But that is not the side of Milton of which we ought to think most often now. It is more just as well as more merciful to him, and it is of more use to ourselves, to fix our eyes on his strength, and not on the weakness that more or less inevitably accompanied it. The ancients admired strength more than the moderns have, at least until lately. But no one can refuse to admire such strength as Milton's, so continuous, so triumphant over exceptional obstacles, so disdainful of all petty or personal ends. There is a majesty about it to which one scarcely knows any real parallel. Strength implies purpose and art implies unity of conception; the instinct of art was only less strong in Milton than the resolute will; so that it

is not surprising that scarcely any life has such unity as his. It is itself a perfect work of art. If we put aside, as we may fairly, the partial political inconsistencies, the rest is absolutely of one piece; a great building, nobly planned from the beginning and nobly executed to the last harmonious detail of the original design. We men are, most of us, weak creatures who accomplish but the tiniest fragments of even such poor designs as we make for our lives. There is something that uplifts us in the spectacle of the triumphant completion of so great a plan as the life of Milton. We are exalted by the thought that, after all, we are of the same flesh and blood, nay, even of the same breed, as this wonderful man. To read the *Paradise Lost* is to realize, in the highest degree, how the poet's imagination can impose a majestic order on the tumultuous confusion of human speech and knowledge. To read its author's life is to realize, with equally exalting clearness, how a strong man's will can so victoriously mould a world of adverse circumstances that affliction, defeat—nay, even the threatening shadow of death itself—are made the very instruments by which he becomes that which he has, from the beginning of his years, chosen for himself to be.

CHAPTER III

THE EARLIER POEMS

WE think to-day of Milton chiefly as the author of *Paradise Lost*, as we think of Wren as the builder of St. Paul's. And we are right. When a man has been the creator of the only very great building in the world which bears upon it from the first stone to the last the mark of a single mind, his other achievements, even though they include Greenwich, Hampton Court, Trinity College Library, and some fifty churches, inevitably fall into the background. So when the world has admitted that a poet has disputed the supreme palm of epic with Homer and Virgil, it hardly cares to remember that he has also challenged all rivals in such forms as the Pastoral Elegy, the Mask, and the Sonnet. *De minimis non curat* might be applied to such cases without any very violent extravagance. The first thought that must always rise to the mind at the mention of Milton's name must be the stupendous achievement of *Paradise Lost*.

Yet if Milton had been hanged at Tyburn

in 1660 he would still unquestionably rank with the half-dozen greatest of the English poets. Chaucer and Spenser would then have ranked after Shakspeare as higher names than his : and possibly also Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley. But he could have feared no other rival : for Dryden is too much a mere man of letters, Pope too much a mere wit, Byron too exclusively a rhetorician, Tennyson too exclusively an artist, to rank with a man in whom burned the divine fire of *Lycidas* and the great Ode. What would Milton's fame have rested upon if he had not lived to write *Paradise Lost* and its two successors ? Upon the volume published in the year 1645, the year of Naseby, when people, one would have supposed, were not thinking much of poetry, and those who were most likely to be doing so were just those least inclined to look for it from John Milton, the Puritan pamphleteer. Yet in that little book was heard for the last time the voice, now raised above itself, of the old poetry which the Cavaliers and courtiers had loved.

No single volume has ever contained so much fine English verse by an unknown or almost unknown poet. It is true that *Lycidas* and *Comus* had been printed before, but *Comus* had appeared anonymously and

Lycidas had been signed only with initials. So that only friends, or people behind the scenes in the literary world, could know anything of Milton's poetry. Nor does he seem to have been very anxious that they should. The other contributors to the volume in memory of Edward King gave their names: the only signature to *Lycidas* is J. M. It was Lawes the composer, not Milton the author, who published *Comus* in 1637. Milton's feelings about it are indicated by the motto on the title page—

“Eheu quid volui misero mihi! floribus
 Austrum
Perditus—”

Quotations can often say for us what we cannot say for ourselves. What Virgil says for Milton is “Alas what is this that I have done? poor fool that I am, could not I have kept my tender buds of verse a little longer from the cutting blasts of public criticism?” Yet no one knew better than Milton that *Comus* was incomparably the greatest of the masks. So in the sonnet on reaching the age of twenty-three he says that his “late spring no bud or blossom shew’th.” Yet he had already written the *Ode on the Nativity*, a performance sufficient, one would have

thought, to give a young poet reasonable self-satisfaction in what he had done, as well as confidence in what he would be able to do. Nor was Milton in the ordinary sense, or perhaps in any, a humble man. Of that false kind of humility, too often recommended from the pulpit, which consists in a beautiful woman trying to suppose herself plain, or an able man trying to be unaware of his ability, no man ever had less than Milton. Neither from himself nor from others did he ever conceal the fact that he was a man of genius. In his eyes no kind of untruth, however specious, could be a virtue. But of a finer humility, built on truth, he was not without his share. The truly humble man may be a genius and may know it and may never affect to deny it : he may know that he has done great things, far greater than have been done by the men he sees around him : but he is not judging himself by the standard of other men : he has another standard, that of "the perfect witness of all-judging Jove," that of "as ever in my great Taskmaster's eye," and of that he knows how very far he has fallen short. Of this nobler humility Milton had something all his life and in his youth much. It is this which reconciles the apparent inconsistency between his many proud con-

fessions that he knows himself to be a man called to do great things and his reluctance to let the world see what he had already done : between his keeping *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* ten years unpublished and his preserving and ultimately publishing almost everything he had ever written, even to scraps of boyish and undergraduate verse. From one point of view his best was nothing : from the other, more than equally true, the humblest line that had come from his pen had received a passport to immortality.

What does the famous volume contain ? It opens with the noble *Ode on the Nativity*, as if to give the discerning reader invincible proof in the first twenty lines put before him that the proud words of the publisher's preface were amply justified. "Let the event guide itself which way it will, I shall deserve of the age by bringing into the light as true a birth as the Muses have brought forth since our famous Spenser wrote ; whose poems in these English ones are as rarely imitated as sweetly excelled. Reader, if thou art eagle-eyed to censure their worth, I am not fearful to expose them to thy exactest perusal." So the preface ends : and then what follows is—

"This is the month, and this the happy morn,
Wherein the Son of Heaven's Eternal King,

Of wedded maid and virgin mother born,
Our great redemption from above did bring;
For so the holy sages once did sing,
That he our deadly forfeit should release,
And with his Father work us a perpetual
peace."

Magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo.
No one had ever written such English verse as this before: no one ever would again. Here was a poet, writing at the age of twenty-one, for whom it was evident that no theme could be so high that he could not find it fit utterance. Fit and also peculiar to himself. The peculiar Miltonic note which none of his innumerable imitators have ever caught for more than a few lines, which he himself never in all his works loses for more than a moment, is instantly struck. As Mr. Mackail has said, "there is not a square inch of his poetry from first to last of which one could not confidently say, 'This is Milton and no one else.' " One may even go further than Mr. Mackail. For he seems to make an exception where certainly none is needed. He is justly insisting that one of the most remarkable things about Milton is that, while English poetry spoke one language in his youth and another in his age, he himself spoke neither. His "accent and speech" alike in *Lycidas* and in *Paradise*

Lost are his own, and in marked contrast to those of contemporary poets. But here Mr. Mackail adds the qualification "if we exclude a few slight juvenile pieces of his boyhood and those metrical versions of the Psalms in which he elected not to be a poet." He asserts, that is, that neither in the Psalms nor in the "juvenile pieces" is Milton characteristically himself and that in the Psalms he is not a poet at all. And no one will care to deny that many of the versions of the Psalms have little Milton and less poetry in them. But is this true of all? And in particular is it true of the paraphrase of Psalm cxxxvi. which, with its companion version of Psalm cxiv. is the most "juvenile" of all? A boy of fifteen has not usually much power of "electing" to be or not to be a poet. But it can only be inadvertence on Mr. Mackail's part that would deny that the boy Milton at that age, though not a great poet, was already himself and, more than that, was already promising what he was soon to perform. Who, looking back from the *Ode* and *Comus* and *Paradise Lost*, does not hear some prelude of the authentic strain of Milton in

"Who by his all-commanding might
Did fill the new-made world with light"?

Is it fanciful to note that we have here, no doubt in their barest primitive form, two of Milton's life-long themes? The Authorized Version speaks of "him that made great lights": how Miltonically transformed those words already are in the two quoted lines! De Quincey said that Milton was "not an author amongst authors, not a poet amongst poets, but a power amongst powers." However that may be, it is certain that he, so occupied all his life with thinking and writing about God, thought of God habitually as a power. For him God is Creator, Sovereign, Judge, much more often than Father: we hear from Milton more of his might than of his love. So at once here, at the age of fifteen, he inserts into the Psalm he is paraphrasing that characteristic phrase, so splendid and potent itself, so gladly speaking of potency and splendour,

"Who by his all-commanding might."

And, if power be one of the most frequent elements in the Miltonic thought, what is more frequent than light in the Miltonic vision? And is not that substitution of "did fill the new-made world with light" for the bare scientific statement of the original, a foretaste of the Milton who, all his life, blind or seeing, felt

the joy and wonder of light as no other man ever did? Do we not rightly hear in it a note that will soon be enriched into the "Light unsufferable" of the *Ode*, the "endless morn of Light" of the *Solemn Music*, the "bosom bright of blazing Majesty and Light" of the *Epitaph on Lady Winchester*, and, not to multiply quotations, of the "Hail, holy Light" which opens the great invocation of the third book of *Paradise Lost*?

It may be as well, before discussing the *Ode* and the other contents of the volume issued in 1645, to mention another poem which is of earlier date than the *Ode*, though it was not printed till 1673: the beautiful Spenserian lines *On the Death of a Fair Infant*. They afford the most real of the exceptions to the rule that Milton is always from the beginning to the end unmistakably and solely himself. In this poem he shows himself at the age of seventeen so soaked in Spenser and Spenser's school that, when his baby niece dies and he sets himself to make her an elegy, what he gives us is these graceful verses conveying as much as a boy of seventeen can catch of the lovely elegiac note of Spenser.

"O noble Spirit: live there ever blessed
The world's late wonder, and the heaven's
new joy;

Live ever there, and leave me here distressed
With mortal cares and cumbrous world's
annoy."

So sings Spenser of Sidney : and, though Milton is scarcely yet more the equal of Spenser than his baby niece was of Sidney, it is a beautiful echo of his master that he gives us in his

" O fairest flower, no sooner blown but blasted,
Soft silken primrose fading timelessly,"

and in

" Yet can I not persuade me thou art dead,
Or that thy corse corrupts in earth's dark
womb,
Or that thy beauties lie in wormy bed,
Hid from the world in a low delvèd tomb."

The poem is full of the then fashionable conceits, which appear again a little in the *Ode*, after which they are for ever put aside by Milton's imaginative severity and high conception of poetry as a finer sort of truth than prose, not a more ingenious kind of lying. Once, and perhaps once only, one hears in it the voice of the Milton of later years—

" Thereby to set the hearts of men on fire
To scorn the sordid world, and unto Heaven
aspire."

But with the *Ode* the age of imitation is over for Milton and he stands forward at once

as himself. The soft graces, somewhat lacking in outline, of the *Fair Infant*, are forgotten in the sonorous strength of the *Ode*. The half-hesitating whisper has become a strain of mighty music; the uncertain hand has gained self-confidence so that the design now shows the boldness and decision of a master. At once, in the second stanza, he is away to heaven, with a curious anticipation of what was to occupy him so much thirty years later—

“ That glorious form, that light unsufferable,
And that far-beaming blaze of majesty,
Wherewith he wont at Heaven’s high council-
table
To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,
He laid aside; and, here with us to be,
Forsook the courts of everlasting day,
And chose with us a darksome house of
mortal clay.”

Milton’s genius was universal, in the strict sense of the word, that is, living in or occupied with the universe. He is as supramundane in his way as Shelley in his. And no part of the universe was more real to him than heaven, the abode of God and angels and spirits, the original and ultimate home of his beloved music and light. It is noticeable that there is hardly a single poem of his — *L’Allegro* and *Samson* are the only important ones—in

which he does not at one point or other make his escape to heaven. In most of them, as all through this *Ode* and the *Solemn Music*, in the conclusions of *Lycidas* and *Il Penseroso*, in the opening of *Comus*, this heavenly flight provides passages of exceptional and peculiarly Miltonic beauty. The fact is that, though little of a mystic, he was from the first entirely of that temper, intellectually descended from Pláto, morally from Stoicism and Christianity but more from Stoicism, which cannot be content to be "confined and pestered in this pinfold here," disdains the "low-thoughted cares" of mere bodily and temporal life, and habitually aspires to live the life of the mind and the spirit,

"Above the smoke and stir of this dim spot
Which men call Earth."

So here at once, in his first important poem, what in other hands might have been a mere telling of the old human and earthly story of the first Christmas night becomes in Milton's a vision of all time and all space, with heaven in it, and the stars, and the music of the spheres, and the great timeless scheme of redemption with which he was to have so much to do later, with history, too, and literature, the false gods of the Old Testament and of the Greek and Roman classics already

anticipating the parts they were to play in *Paradise Lost*.

And note one other thing. Milton is only twenty-one, but he is already an incomparable artist. The stanza had been so far the usual form for lyrics, and he adopts it here for the first and last time. But if he accepts the instrument prescribed by tradition, with what a master's hand this wonderful boy of twenty-one touches it, and to what astonishing music ! It seems that the stanza itself is his own. Every one has felt the combination in it, as he manages it, of the romantic movement and suggestion which he loved and renounced with the classical strength which is the chief element in the final impression he made on English poetry. As yet the romantic quality is the stronger, and even one of the mighty closing Alexandrines is dedicated to the lovely Elizabethan fancy of the "yellow skirted fayeres" who

"Fly after the night-steeds, leaving their
moon-loved maze."

How such a line as that, or still more plainly the two which end the most romantic stanza of all—

"No nightly trance, or breathèd spell,
Inspires the pale-eyed priest from the
prophetic cell"

found a rejoicing echo in Keats is obvious. This, of course, has often been noticed. But has it ever been remarked that there are also lines in the poem which might have been written by another nineteenth-century poet of equal but very different genius?

“The winds, with wonder whist,
Smoothly the waters kissed,
Whispering new joys to the mild Ocean;”—

should we be surprised to come upon these elemental loves and joys heralding a new reign of justice and peace in the *Prometheus Unbound*?

But neither Keats nor Shelley, who both had their affinities to Milton, had it in him to reach the concentrated Miltonic energy of such lines as—

“The wakeful trump of doom must thunder
through the deep,”
or—

“Than his bright throne or burning axletree
could bear.”

Almost every one of these final Alexandrines, it is to be observed, sums up the note of its stanza in a chord of majestic power. They are the most Miltonic lines in the poem; for it is precisely “majesty”

which is the unique and essential Miltonic quality; and Dryden in the famous epigram ought to have kept it for him and not given it to Virgil, though by doing so he would have made his splendid compliment impossible.

Among the poems that followed in the 1645 edition were the *Passion*, a failure which Milton recognized as a failure and abandoned, but yet, characteristically, did not refuse to publish; the *Epitaph on the Marchioness of Winchester*, which, still youthful as it is and is seen to be by the frigid and false antithesis of Queen and Marchioness with which it ends, has yet very beautiful lines—

“Gentle Lady, may thy grave
Peace and quiet ever have!
After this thy travail sore,
Sweet rest seize thee evermore”;

the famous lines on Shakspeare, contributed anonymously to the second Folio; and the noble outburst of heavenly music which begins—

“Blest pair of Sirens, pledges of Heaven’s
joy
Sphere-born harmonious sisters, Voice and
Verse.”

This was written some years later; and even after *Paradise Lost* it may rank as the most daring and entirely successful of Milton's long-sustained wheelings of musical flight. The stanza no longer provides him with space enough: and here his whole twenty-eight lines are one continuous strain, with no break in them and scarcely any pause, in ten-syllabled lines of boldly varied rhyme and accent. His task here is not so difficult as it was to be in *Paradise Lost*, for he has rhyme to provide him with variety and he admits two verses of six syllables among his twenty-eight; but already he is completely master of the possibilities of the ten-syllable line, and can make it yield as lavish a wealth of variety in unity as was later on to make the great passages of *Paradise Lost* an eternal amazement to lovers and practisers of the art of verse.

“ Wed your divine sounds, and mixed power
employ,
Dead things with inbreathed sense able to
pierce;
And to our high-raised phantasy present
That undisturbèd song of pure concent.”

They are all the same line, and yet how different. It is difficult to believe that this is the same metre which Waller and Dryden

were soon, amid universal applause, to file down into the smooth monotony of—

“ Great wits are sure to madness near allied,
And thin partitions do their bounds divide;
Else why should he, with wealth and honour
 blest,
Refuse his age the needful hours of rest? ”

For Dryden, as still more for Pope and the school of Pope, the thing to accomplish, so far as possible, is to prevent any of the natural accents falling upon the third, fifth or other odd syllables; there is, for instance, not one which does so in the first fifty lines of *Absalom and Achitophel* or of the *Epistle to Arbuthnot*. The object of Milton, on the contrary, is to vary the position of his accents to the utmost possible extent compatible with the preservation of the verse. In these four lines his first accent falls on the first syllable in the first two, probably on the fourth in the third, and on the second in the last. And the other accents are similarly varied in place and, it may be added, in number. In Milton's case the listener's wonder is at the number and intricacy of the variations he can play upon the theme of his verse; in Pope's it is at the amazing cleverness with which it can be exactly repeated in

different words. Milton's music, too, is continuous, not broken into couplets sharply divided from each other. His verses pass into each other as wave melts into wave on the sea-shore; there is a constant breaking on the beach, but which will break and which will glide imperceptibly into its successor we cannot guess though we sit watching for an hour; the sameness of rise and fall, crash and silence, is unbroken, yet no one wave is exactly like its predecessor, no two successive minutes give either eye or ear exactly the same experience. So with Milton's verse; even the ocean of *Paradise Lost* has few or no waves of music of more varied unity, of more continuous variety than such lines as—

“ As once we did, till disproportioned sin
Jarred against Nature's chime and with
harsh din
Broke the fair music that all creatures
made
To their great Lord, whose love their motion
swayed
In perfect diapason whilst they stood
In first obedience and their state of good.”

The chief remaining minor poems of Milton are the *Allegro* and *Penseroso*, *Comus*, *Lycidas* and the Sonnets. The two first are written

in those rhymed eight-syllable lines which he had already used in part of his *Song on May Morning*. Like that beautiful little poem, they represent him in his simplest mood, the mood of the quiet years at Horton, spent, more than any other part of his life, in the open air, and among plain folk unlettered and unpolitical. It is natural enough, therefore, that they are the most popular as they are the easiest of all his poems. Their two titles, which mean The Cheerful Man and The Thoughtful or Meditative Man, point to the two moods from which they regard life. Both moods are, of course, described as they might actually be experienced by a highly cultivated and serious man like Milton himself. The gravity is the gravity of a man of thought, not of a man of affairs; the pleasures are those of a scholar and a poet, not those of a trifler, a sportsman, or a sensualist. Like all Milton's works they borrow freely from earlier poets, remain entirely original and Miltonic, and are imitated only at the peril of the imitator. Any one who looks at the parallel passages in Marlowe and Fletcher will see how very like they are and how very little the likeness matters. The poems stand alone; there is nothing of quite the same kind in English.

The least unlike pair of poems is perhaps the two Spring Odes of the present Poet Laureate, than whom no one has owed more to Milton or repaid the debt with more verse which Milton would have been glad to inspire. But Mr. Bridges has, of course, avoided anything approaching a direct imitation; he has merely used the hint of two contrasted poems on one subject, touching inevitably, as Milton had touched, upon some of the opposite pleasures of town and country, and bringing Milton's mood of cheerful gravity to bear upon them both.

It is unnecessary to discuss in detail poems so well known. But a few words may be said. Milton was never again to be so genial as he is here. Never again does he place himself so sympathetically close to the daily tasks and pleasures of ordinary unimportant men and women. After characteristically choosing the West Wind and the Dawn as likelier parents of true mirth than any god of wine or sensual pleasure, he will go on for once to call for the company of—

“ Sport that wrinkled Care derides,
And Laughter holding both his sides ”;

he will cast a pleased eye on the birds and flowers and the sunrise—the latter moving

him to the characteristic magnificence which in this poem he has elsewhere forgone; he will recognize, with the gratefulness of the tired student, the careless gladness in the voices of ploughman and milkmaid, as he passes them in his early morning walk. Then he will give a glance to beauty which such as they cannot see, or cannot be fully conscious of seeing—

“Mountains on whose barren breast
The labouring clouds do often rest”;

will touch on the romance of old towers and poetic memories of which they have only dimly heard, and look back at Thyrsis and Corydon and all the pastoral poetry which such scenes recall to the scholar's memory. The next section of the poem is taken from a different world, that of the merry England of the Middle Age with its ale and dances and Faery Mab; while the final one carries us quite away from the rustics to the town and the town's pleasures, pageantry and drama and music—this last, as always, moving the poet to peculiar rapture, and an answering music of verse—

“The melting voice through mazes running,
Untwisting all the chains that tie
The hidden soul of harmony.”

Il Penseroso is the praise of Melancholy as *L'Allegro* of Mirth. But Milton was not a melancholy man in our sense of the word. When Keats declares that—

“in the very temple of Delight
Veiled Melancholy has her sovran shrine,”

he is interpreting a mood into which Milton could not even in imagination enter, that of the intellectual sensualist who dreams his life away and cannot act. Milton was a man of action and character, and his Melancholy, quite unlike this, is that of the Spirit in his own *Comus*, who “began—

“Wrapt in a pleasing fit of melancholy,
To meditate my rural minstrelsy.”

He hails her at once as a “Goddess sage and holy” and as a “Nun devout and pure”; and it is evident from the first that her sorrows, so far as she is sorrowful, are those of aspiring spirit, not those of self-indulging and disappointed flesh. Her life of quiet studies and pleasures is self-chosen; there is a note of will and self-control in the words in which the poet bids her call about her Peace and Quiet and Spare Fast, Retired Leisure and Contemplation and Silence; and the descriptions which follow of his walks

and studies and pleasures, in town and country, by night and morning, are those of a man who has deliberately shaped his life, and means so to live it that he shall leave it without regret or shame and with the hope of passing from it to a better.

Nor is it any mood of mere melancholy that has given us in this poem such pleasant glimpses of his walks abroad and studies at home in these Horton years. He pays his tribute to Plato, the Greek tragedians and the dramatists of Elizabethan and Jacobean England; and to his own two most famous predecessors, Chaucer and Spenser; and we think of the scholarly hours spent gravely and quietly but far from unhappily. More delightful still, with more beauty and more happiness in them, are the poem's well-known landscapes—

“ the wandering moon,
Riding near her highest noon,
Like one that had been led astray
Through the heaven's wide pathless way.”

Perhaps no one again, till Shelley came, felt the vastness, the pathlessness, of the heaven as Milton did. Or, to come to earth again, where does poetry set the ear more instantly and actively at the work of imaginative

creation than in those finely suggestive lines about the curfew—

“ Over some wide-watered shore,
Swinging slow with sullen roar ” ?

And what of that woodland solitude at noon, with memories in it of so many poets of Greece, Rome, Italy and England, the

“ shadows brown, that Sylvan loves,
Of pine, or monumental oak,
Where the rude axe with heavèd stroke
Was never heard the Nymphs to daunt
Or fright them from their hallowed haunt,”

which carries us on to perhaps the loveliest lines in all the *Paradise Lost*—

“ In shadier bower,
More sacred and sequestered, though but
feigned,
Pan or Sylvanus never slept, nor nymph
Nor Faunus haunted.”

There is in the two passages just the difference between the youth and maturity of genius; but that is all. So *Il Penseroso* passes on its delightful way, ending, of course, in music and heaven.

There, too, “ before the starry threshold of Jove’s court,” the next of these earlier works of Milton, the mask *Comus*, begins.

It strikes its high note at once in what an old lover of literature boldly called "the finest opening of any theatrical piece ancient or modern."

"Before the starry threshold of Jove's court
My mansion is, where those immortal
 shapes
Of bright aerial spirits live insphered
In regions mild of calm and serene air,
Above the smoke and stir of this dim spot
Which men call Earth, and, with low-
 thoughted care,
Confined and pestered in this pinfold here,
Strive to keep up a frail and feverish being,
Unmindful of the crown that Virtue gives,
After this mortal change, to her true
 servants
Amongst the enthroned gods on sainted
 seats."

That looks forward to *Paradise Lost*, not backward to the masks of the previous generation of poets. The "loud uplifted angel-trumpet" is sounded in it, and we know that we have travelled a long way from the trivial, superficial and often coarse entertainments which would have been the models of *Comus* if Milton had been the man to accept models of any kind, least of all of such a kind. Like them his mask was an aristocratic entertainment, played to a noble

audience by the scions of a great house. But the resemblance scarcely goes further. The older masks were mainly spectacles; magnificent spectacles indeed, designed sometimes, as one may see in the Chatsworth Library, by such artists as Inigo Jones and produced at immense expense; but just for that reason addressed to the eye much more than to the ear, and scarcely at all to the mind. Even when written by such a man as Ben Jonson, the words, except in the lyrics, are of almost no importance. The business was to show a number of pretty scenes, and noble ladies, and to give them a chance of exhibiting their clothes, and their voices. The last gave Jonson his chance; the fine Horatian workman that he was could always produce a lyric that would fit any situation and give some dignity to any trivial personage. But the taint of vanity and fashion, pomp and externality, inevitably clung to the whole thing. Too many personages were introduced, probably because in such plays there were always a great many applicants for parts; and the inevitable result was that in a short piece none of them had space to develop any character or life. But Milton knew, as the Greeks knew and Shakspeare did not always, that in the few hours of a

stage performance only a very few characters have time to develop themselves in such a way as to interest and convince the hearer's imagination, and that if there are many they never become more than a list of names. So he, who could not touch anything without giving it character, limits his personages to four or five that they may at least be human beings and not mere singers of songs or allegorical abstractions. And, like some of his predecessors, he takes an ethical theme, the praise and power of Chastity. Fletcher in *The Faithful Shepherdess* had taken the same; as Jonson had taken the praise of Temperance, which is also partly Milton's subject, in *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue*, in which a grosser Comus is one of the characters. But to get any parallel to the power of conviction with which Milton handles it one has to go behind Jonson, whose mask is an entirely superficial performance, and even behind Fletcher, in whose *Shepherdess* the many beautiful and moving touches are lost in a crowd of characters and a wilderness of artificial intrigue; one has to go back to the man whom Milton once called his "original," to the author of the *Faerie Queen*. No one but Spenser could have anticipated the scene between Comus and the Lady, where indeed

Milton, like Spenser in the bower of Acrasia, has lavished such wealth upon his sinner that he has hardly been able to give a due overbalance to his saint. Yet she is no lay figure, and one is not surprised that Comus should twice show his consciousness that she has within her some holy, some more than mortal power. Milton has given her a song of such astonishing music that one wonders whether the composer Lawes, for whom the whole was written, could touch it without injury—

“ Sweet Echo, sweetest Nymph, that liv’st
unseen

Within thy airy shell

By slow Meander’s margent green,
And in the violet-embroidered vale

Where the love-lorn nightingale
Nightly to thee her sad song mourneth
well;

Canst thou not tell me of a gentle pair
That likest thy Narcissus are?

O, if thou have

Hid them in some flowery cave,

Tell me but where,

Sweet Queen of Parley, Daughter of the
Sphere !

So mayst thou be translated to the skies,
And give resounding grace to all Heaven’s
harmonies.”

The lyrics were the chief beauty of the old masks, but the best of them sink into in-

significance before such a masterpiece of art as this. Perhaps nothing in a modern language comes nearer to giving the peculiar effect which is the glory of Pindar. Of course there is in it more of the fanciful, and more of the romantic, than there was in Pindar; and its style is tenderer, prettier and perhaps altogether smaller than his. But the elaborate and intricate perfection of its art and language, the way in which the intellect in it serves the imagination, is exactly Pindar. In any case it is certainly one of the most entirely beautiful of English lyrics. One listens with delight to the musician working out his intricately beautiful theme; or is it nearer the impression we get to say that we watch the skilful dancer executing his elaborate figure? In either case we await with sure confidence the triumphant close. The final couplet, by the way, and particularly the great Alexandrine, is a curious anticipation of Dryden's finest manner. But the rest is a music Dryden's ear never heard. No wonder Comus cries—

“ Can any mortal mixture of earth's mould
Breathe such divine enchanting ravishment?
Sure something holy lodges in that breast,
And with these raptures moves the vocal
 air
To testify his hidden residence.

How sweetly did they float upon the wings
Of silence, through the empty-vaulted night,
At every fall smoothing the raven down
Of darkness till it smiled ! ”

The last lines show that Milton has not yet outgrown the Jacobean taste for conceits. So a little later on we find him writing that—

“ Silence
Was took ere she was ware, and wished she
might
Deny her nature, and be never more
Still to be so displaced ” ;

a piece of intellectual trickery such as Shakspeare too often played with, and Donne laboured at; and one of a special interest because we see it again later transformed and purified in the famous passage of *Paradise Lost*, in which “ Silence was pleased ” not only with the stillness of evening, but also with the song of the bird whose “ amorous descant ” alone interrupts it. Yet even that seemed to Warton, the best of Milton’s early critics, a conceit unworthy of the poet. So difficult it is for “ rational ” criticism to see the distinction between an intellectual extravagance and a flight of the imagination.

There are other things in *Comus* beside conceits which recall Shakspeare. What can

be more exactly in his freshest youngest manner than such a line as—

“ Love-darting eyes and tresses like the
morn ” ?

And what can be closer to the note of the great Histories and Tragedies than the Elder Brother's outburst of faith—

“ If this fail,
The pillared firmament is rottenness,
And earth's base built on stubble ” ?

I see no reason whatever to doubt, in spite of what has lately been said by a modern critic and poet, that these speeches of the Brothers and the Lady, rather than those of Comus, represent Milton's own conception of life. It is true, of course, that *Comus* was one of several masks performed as an aristocratic counterblast to the attack of Prynne and the Puritans on all stage performances. But that only strengthens the proof of Milton's own leaning to a grave and temperate mode of life. Even when he writes a mask he will insist that it shall be a thing of noble art and serious moral. He was no narrow-minded fanatic and will write a piece for great ladies to perform when asked by his accomplished friend Lawes : but he is already

the man who was later to denounce "court amours, Mix'd dance and wanton masque"; and if he writes a mask himself it will be to take the old "high-flown commonplace" of the magic power of chastity and give it an entirely new seriousness and beauty. The notion of Mr. Newbolt that there were two Miltons, one before and the other after the Civil War, and that the one was "sincerely engaged on the side of liberal manners" while the other was an ill-tempered enemy of civilization and the arts of life, is a complete delusion. The "Lady of Christ's" who was unpopular on account of his severe chastity, was already a strict Puritan of the only sort he ever became; and the author of *Paradise Lost*, as all the evidence shows, was no morbid sectary but a lover of learning and music and society. Of course, no man goes unchanged through a great struggle such as that to which Milton gave twenty years of life. There is a development, or a difference, call it what you will, between the Dante who wrote the *Vita Nuova* and him who wrote the *Divina Commedia*. That could not but be; a body that had gone into exile and a soul that had visited hell must leave their traces on a man. But the essential Dante remains one and the same all the while. And

so does Milton. Nothing can be more certain than that the grave boy whose gravity impressed all Cambridge, and had taken immortal shape in the *Nativity Ode* and the sonnet of the "great Taskmaster's eye" before he was much past twenty, did not mean to hold up a drunken sensualist like Comus as a model for youth. He was not an ascetic, then or later; and he was writing a dramatic poem; and, of course, had no difficulty in giving Comus a fine speech about the follies of total abstinence which, indeed, he loved no better than other monkeries. The Lady, in reply, as she is dramatically bound, over-exalts her "sage and serious doctrine of Virginity" as Comus had overstated the case against it; but what she praises is Temperance, not Abstinence. Her virginity is that of a free maiden, not that of a vowed nun, and there is nothing in it to unfit her to play the part which, when Eve plays it, gives Milton occasion for his well-known apostrophe to true love. Nor is there any inconsistency between his denunciation of "wanton masks" in that passage, and his being the author of *Comus*. His own mask was as different as possible from those others, the common sort, in which he saw the purveyors of "adulterous lust," and with which, now as then, he would have nothing whatever

to do. His "Lady" alone, even without her brothers, makes that clear. What she says may not be so poetically attractive as the speech of Comus; but it has just the note of exaltation which is heard in all Milton's great ethical and spiritual outbursts, and plainly utters the other and stronger side of his convictions. The truth is that from the very beginning to the very end of his life Milton had all the intensity of Puritanism, more than all its angry contempt of vice, but nothing whatever of its uncivilized narrow-mindedness. A large part of the peculiar interest of his character lies in the fact that he, almost alone of Englishmen, managed to unite the strength of the Reformation with the breadth of the Renaissance. We have both in the lovely verses which are the Epilogue of *Comus*; and if it begins with—

" the gardens fair
Of Hesperus, and his daughters three
That sing about the golden tree : "

and the—

" Beds of hyacinth and roses
Where young Adonis oft reposes,
Waxing well of his deep wound
In slumber soft, and on the ground
Sadly sits the Assyrian queen " ;

it ends with the Stoic Puritan motto, "Love Virtue, she alone is free." And that these last six lines were no formal compliment to the conventions is proved by the fact that Milton chose the final couplet—

"if Virtue feeble were
Heaven itself would stoop to her,"

as the motto he appended to his signature in the album of an Italian Protestant at Geneva in 1639, adding the significant Latin which claims the sentiment as utterly his own—

"Cælum, non animum, muto dum trans mare
curro."

These words we, looking back on his whole life, may fitly translate: "I am always the same John Milton, whether in Rome, Geneva, or London, whether I write *Comus* or *Allegro* or *Paradise Lost*." For never were unity and continuity of personality more complete than in Milton.

There remains *Lycidas*, in which Milton out-distances all previous English elegy almost as easily as in *Comus* he had out-distanced all the earlier masks. It stands with the great passages of *Paradise Lost* as the most consummate blending of scholarship and poetry in Milton and therefore in English. All

pastoral poetry is in it, Theocritus and Virgil, Spenser and Sidney, Drayton and Drummond, with memories, too, of Ovid and Shakspeare and the Bible; and yet it is pure and undiluted Milton, with the signet of his peculiar mind and temper stamped on its every phrase. It was his contribution to a volume of verses published at Cambridge in 1638 to the memory of Edward King, a younger contemporary of his at Christ's who was drowned off the Welsh coast in August 1637. King was already a Fellow of his college, and one of the most promising young clergymen of his day. Milton had liked and respected him, no doubt, but had certainly not been so intimate with him as with young Charles Diodati who died almost exactly a year later, and was lamented by his great friend in the *Epitaphium Damonis* which is the finest of the Latin poems. Those who read Latin will enjoy its close parallelism with *Lycidas* and its touches of a still closer bond of affection, as that in which the poet contrasts the easy friendships of birds and animals, soon won, soon lost and soon replaced by others, with their hard rareness among men who scarcely find one kindred spirit in a thousand, and too often lose that one by premature fate before the fruit of

friendship has had time to ripen. But if the death of Diodati aroused the deeper sorrow in Milton, that of King produced unquestionably the greater poem. It is a common mistake to think that to write a great elegy a man must have suffered a great sorrow. That is not the case. Shelley wrote *Adonais* about Keats whom he knew very little; Spenser *Daphnaïda* about a lady whom he did not know at all. It is not the actual experience of sorrow that the elegiac poet needs; but the power of heart and imagination to conceive it and the power of language to give it fit expression. Moreover, the poet's real subject is not the death of Keats or King or Mrs. Gorges: it is the death of all who have been or will be loved in all the world, and the sorrow of all the survivors, the tragic destiny of youth and hope and fame, the doom of frailty and transience which has been eternally pronounced on so many of the fairest gifts of Nature and all the noblest works of man.

About *Lycidas* criticism has less to say than to unsay. Johnson's notorious attack upon it is only the extremest instance of the futility of applying to poetry the tests of prose and of the general incapacity of that generation to apply any other. Even

Warton, who really loved these early poems of Milton and did so much to recall them to public notice, could speak of him as appearing to have had "a very bad ear"! At such a time it was inevitable that the artificial absurdity of pastoral poetry which is a prose fact should blind all but the finest judges to the poetic fact that living spirit can animate every form it finds prepared for its indwelling. Johnson and the rest were right in perceiving that pastoral elegy had very commonly been an insincere affectation, a mere exercise in writing; the age into which they were born denied them the ear that could hear the amazing music of *Lycidas*, or perceive the sensuous, imaginative, spiritual intensity which drowns its incongruities in a flood of poetic life. There is a still more important truth which that generation could not see. Prose aims at expressing facts directly, and sometimes succeeds. That is what Johnson liked, and practised himself with masterly success. But when he and his asked that poetry should do the same they were asking that she should deny her nature. She knows that her truth can only be expressed or suggested by its imaginative equivalents. It is with poetry as with religion. Religious truth stated directly becomes philosophy or science,

conveying other elements of truth, perhaps, but failing to convey the element which is specifically religious; and therefore religion employs parable, ceremony, sacrament, mystery, to express what scientifically exact prose cannot express. So poetry can neither deal directly with King's death or Milton's grief nor be content with a subject which is a mere fact in time and space. If it did, the effect produced would not be a poetic effect; the experience of the reader would not be a poetic experience. The poet must transform or transcend the facts which have set his powers to work; he must escape from them or rather lift them up with him new-created into the world of the imagination; he must impose upon them a new form, invented or accepted by himself, and in any case so heated by his own fire of poetry that it can fuse and reshape the matter submitted to it into that unity of beauty which is a work of art. That is what Milton does in *Lycidas* by the help of the pastoral fiction; and what he could not have done without it or some imaginative substitute for it.

The truest criticism on his pastoralism is really that that mould was too small and fragile to hold all he wanted to put into it. The great outburst of St. Peter, with its

scarcely disguised assault upon the Laudian clergy, strains it almost to bursting. Yet no one would wish it away; for it adds a passage of Miltonic fire to what but for Phœbus and St. Peter would be too plaintive to be fully characteristic of Milton whose genius lay rather in strength than in tenderness. Yet perhaps we love *Lycidas* all the more for giving us our almost solitary glimpse of a Milton in whom the affections are more than the will, and sorrow not sublimated into resolution. Its modesty, too, is astonishing. He had already written the *Nativity Ode*, *Comus* and *Allegro* and *Penseroso*, and yet he fancies himself still unripe for poetry and is only forced by the "bitter constraint" of the death of his friend to pluck the berries of his laurel which seem to him still "harsh and crude"; for of course these allusions refer to his own immaturity and not, as Todd thought, to that of his dead friend. And the presence of the same over-mastering emotion which compelled him to begin is felt throughout. There is no poem of his in which he appears to make so complete a surrender to the changing moods of passion. The verses seem to follow his heart and fancy just where they choose to lead. We watch him as he thinks first of his friend's death and then of the

duty of paying some poetic tribute to him; and so of his own death and of some other poet of the future who may write of it and—

“ bid fair peace be to my sable shroud.”

How natural it is in all its superficial unnaturalness ! The walks and talks and verses made together at Cambridge so inevitably leading to the “ heavy change now thou art gone, Now thou art gone and never must return ”; and the fancy, partly but not wholly a reminiscence of their classical studies, that the trees and flowers which they had loved together must now be sharing the survivor’s grief; the reproach to Nature and Nature’s divinities following on the thought of Nature’s sympathy, and followed by the first of the two incomparable returns upon himself which are among the chief beauties of the poem—

“ Ay me ! I fondly dream !

‘ Had ye been there,’ for what could that
have done ? ”

And so to the vanity of earthly fame and the thought of another fame which is not vanity. Twice he seems to be going to escape out of the world of pastoral, as he strikes his own trumpet note of confident

faith and stern judgment; twice the unfailing instinct of art calls him back and makes a beauty of what might have been a mere incongruity—

“ Return, Alpheus; the dread voice is past,
That shrunk thy streams : return, Sicilian
Muse,
And call the vales, and bid them hither cast
Their bells and flowerets of a thousand
hues.”

The flowers come, in their amazing beauty, as poetry knows and names them, not altogether after the order of nature; till the fine flight is once more recalled to earth in that second return to the sad reality of things which provides the most beautiful, and as the manuscript shows, one of the most carefully elaborated passages in the whole—

“ Bid amaranthus all his beauty shed,
And daffadillies fill their cups with tears,
To strew the laureate hearse where Lycid
lies.
For so, to interpose a little ease,
Let our frail thoughts dally with false
surmise.
Ay me ! whilst thee the shores and sounding
seas
Wash far away, where'er thy bones are
hurled,
Whether beyond the stormy Hebrides,

Where thou perhaps under the whelming
tide

Visit'st the bottom of the monstrous world."

The least critical reader, when he is told that the daffodil and amaranthus lines were once in the reverse order, that the "frail thoughts" were at first "sad," and the "shores" "floods," and above all that the "whelming tide" was once a thing so insignificant as the "humming tide," can judge for himself by what a succession of inspirations a work of consummate art is produced.

There remain the sonnets, whose sufficient praise is given in an immortal line of Wordsworth, while all that a fine critic had thought or learnt about them is contained in the scholarly edition of Mark Pattison. Technically they are remarkable, like everything else of Milton's, at once for their conservatism and their originality; while their content has all his characteristic sincerity. They occupy a most important place in the history of the English sonnet, which had so far been almost entirely given up to a single theme, that of the poet's unhappy love, which had commonly little existence outside his verses. The shadowy mistresses who emulated the glories of Beatrice and Laura were even less substantial than they; and, though that could

not hinder great poets from making fine poetry out of them, it was fatal to the ordinary sonneteer, and gave the sonnet a tradition of overblown and insincere verbiage. From all this Milton emancipated it and, as Landor said, "gave the notes to glory." To glory and to other things; for not all his sonnets are consecrated to glory. They deal with various subjects; but each, whether its topic be his blindness, the death of his wife, or the fame of Fairfax or Cromwell, is the product of a personal experience of his own. No one can read them through without feeling that he gets from them a true knowledge of the man. At their weakest, as in that *To a Lady*, they convey, in the words of Mark Pattison, "the sense that here is a true utterance of a great soul." The rather commonplace thought and language somehow do not prevent the total effect from being impressive. He entirely fails only when he goes below the level of poetry altogether and repeats in verse the angry scurrility of his divorce pamphlets. And even there some remnant of his artist's sense of the self-restraint of verse preserves him from the worst degradations of his prose. For the rest, they give us his musical and scholarly tastes, his temperate pleasures and his love of that sort of company which Shelley

confessed to preferring, "such society as is quiet, wise and good"; they give us the high ideal with which he became a poet, the high patriotism that drew him into politics, and that sense, both for himself and for others, of life as a thing to be lived in the presence and service of God which was the eternally true part of his religion. The four finest are those on the Massacre in Piedmont, On his Blindness, On attaining the age of twenty-three, and that addressed to Cromwell, which perhaps has the finest touch of all in the pause which comes with such tremendous effect after "And Woreester's laureate wreath." But that to the memory of his wife and "Captain or Colonel or Knight in Arms," the one addressed to Lawrence and the first of those addressed to Skinner, come very near the best; and the whole eight would be included by any good judge in a collection of the fifty best English sonnets, to which Milton would make a larger contribution than any one except, perhaps, Wordsworth and Shakspeare.

And both of these poets, Shakspeare always and Wordsworth often, sinned as Milton did not against the true genius of the sonnet. No doubt they had nearly all precedent with them, and their successors down to Rossetti

and Meredith have followed in the same path. But not even Shakspeare and Petrarch can alter the fact that the genius of the sonnet is solitary and self-contained. A series of sonnets is an artistic contradiction in terms. There may be magnificent individual sonnets in it which can stand alone, without reference to those that precede or follow; and so far so good; but on the bulk of the series there inevitably rests the taint of incompleteness. They do not explain themselves. They are chapters not books, parts of a composition and not the whole. It is scarcely possible to doubt that, fine as they may be, the effect they produce is not that of the finest single sonnets, beginning and ending within their own limits. Milton may never have been under any special temptation to write a set of consecutive sonnets; but it is in any case like his habitual submission of all authority to his own judgment that he wrote sonnets and yet defied the tradition of writing them as a continuous series, as he had also disdained the amorous affectations which had been their established subject. But in this, as in everything else where art was concerned, he was as much a conservative as a revolutionary. And so his scholarly interest in the Italian sonnet, and, we may be sure, his consummate

critical judgment, made him set aside the various sonnet forms adopted by Shakspeare, Spenser and other famous English poets, and follow the original model of Petrarch more strictly than it had been followed by any English poet of importance before him; for the Petrarchan sonnets of Sidney, Constable and Drummond all end with the unItalian concluding couplet. But here again Milton's example has not proved decisive. Wordsworth did not always follow it, though he never deserted it with success. Keats began with it and gave it up for the Shakspearean model with the concluding couplet. But of him again, it may be said that, while he only wrote three great sonnets and two of them are Shakspearean, his single masterpiece is Petrarchan or Miltonic. Rossetti, on the other hand, has no Shakspearean sonnets, and his finest are among the best proofs of how much a sonnet gains in unity by the single pause between the eight lines and the six instead of Shakspeare's fourfold division, and especially by the interlocking of the rhymes in the second half of the sonnet as opposed to Shakspeare's isolated and half-epigrammatic final couplet.

There can be little doubt, though attempts have been made to deny it, that nothing but

the prestige of the greatest of all poetic names has prevented the superiority of the Petrarchan model from being universally recognized. Shakspeare could do anything. But the greatness of his sonnets is due not to their form but simply to their being his; and the fact that he could triumph over the defects of that form ought not to make other people fancy that these defects do not exist. They do; and but for the courage and genius of Milton they might have dominated the history of the English sonnet to this day. That is part of our great debt to Milton. He could not give the sonnet the supple and insinuating sweetness with which Shakspeare often filled it. He had not got that in him, and perhaps it would scarcely have proved tolerable except as part of a sequence in which it could be balanced by sterner matter. Nor, again, could he give it Shakspeare's infinite tenderness, nor his sense of the world's brooding mystery. But he could and did give it his own high spirit of courage, sincerity and strength, and his own masterly cunning of craftsmanship. And no just reader of the greatest sonnets of the nineteenth century forgets Milton's share in their greatness. Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie has lately remarked that it is in the *Prelude* and *Excursion* of

Wordsworth that "more profoundly than anywhere out of Milton himself Milton's spiritual legacy is employed." The same thing may be as truly said of Wordsworth's sonnets. If, as he said, in Milton's hands "the thing became a trumpet," there is no doubt that it remained one in his own. He is a greater master of the sonnet than Milton; the greatest on the whole that England has known. He used it far more freely than Milton and for more varied purposes. Perhaps it hardly afforded room enough for one the peculiar note of whose genius was vastness. It is seldom possible to do justice to a quotation from *Paradise Lost* without giving at least twenty lines. The sense, and especially the musical effect, is incomplete with less; for a Miltonic period is a series of intellectual and rhythmical actions and reactions which cannot be detached from each other without loss. It is obvious that a poet whose natural range is so great can hardly be fully himself in the sonnet. But Wordsworth had little of this spacious freedom of poetic energy; to him—

“ ’twas pastime to be bound
Within the sonnet's scanty plot of ground.”

And so he could use it for everything; for great events and also for very small; not

exhausting great or small, but finding in each, whatever it might be, some single aspect or quality which he could touch to new power by that meditative tenderness of his to which Milton was, to his great loss, an entire stranger. The natural mysticism, for instance, of such sonnets as, "It is a beauteous evening, calm and free," or, "Earth has not anything to show more fair," is quite out of Milton's reach. In this and other ways Wordsworth could do much more with the sonnet than Milton could. But without Milton some of his very greatest things would scarcely have been attempted. All the sonnets that utter his magnanimous patriotism, his dauntless passion for English liberty, his burning sympathy with the oppressed, the "holy glee" of his hatred of tyranny, are of the right lineage of Milton himself. One can almost hear Milton crying—

"It is not to be thought of that the Flood
Of British freedom, which to the open sea
Of the world's praise from dark antiquity
Hath flowed 'with pomp of waters unwith-
stood,'
Roused though it be full often to a mood
Which spurns the checks of salutary bands,
That this most famous Stream in Bogs and
Sands
Should perish; and to evil and to good
Be lost for ever."

There and in the "Two Voices" and in the "Inland within a Hollow Vale" and in the Toussaint l'Ouverture sonnet, and others, we cannot fail to catch an echo of the poet who first "gave the sonnet's notes to glory." No one can count up all the things which have united in the making of any poem, but among those which made these sonnets possible must certainly be reckoned the Fairfax and Cromwell sonnets, and above all the still more famous one on the Massacre in Piedmont. The forces which animated England to defy and defeat Napoleon were only partly moral; but so far as they were that they found perfect expression through only one voice, that of Wordsworth. And there is no doubt as to where he caught the note which he struck again to such high purpose. He has told us himself—

"Milton, thou shouldst be living at this hour;
England hath need of thee."

And, what seems stranger, he has now had in return a kind of reflected influence upon Milton. The total experience of a reader of poetry is a thing of many actions and reactions, co-operating and intermingling with each other. And as we can hardly read Virgil or the Psalms now without thinking of all

that has come of them, and reading some of it back into the old words whose first creator could not foresee all that would be found in them, so it is with Milton and Wordsworth. There are many things in Milton which no Wordsworthian can now read exactly as they were read in the seventeenth century. Wordsworth's line

“ Thy Soul was like a Star and dwelt apart ”

was strangely true of Milton as he lived in his own day. But it is less true now that his place is among the spiritual company of the English poets and that Wordsworth stands by his side, or sits at his feet. That does not detract from his greatness. Indeed, it adds to it; for it is only the greater poets who thus transcend their own day and cannot be read as if they belonged to it alone. Read the great sonnet on the Massacre—

“ Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints,
 whose bones
Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains
 cold;
Even them who kept thy truth so pure
 of old,
When all our fathers worshiped stocks
 and stones,

Forget not; in thy book record their groans
Who were thy sheep, and in their ancient
fold
Slain by the bloody Piemontese, that
rolled
Mother with infant down the rocks.
Their moans
The vales redoubled to the hills, and they
To heaven. Their martyred blood and
ashes sow
O'er all the Italian fields, where still doth
sway
The triple Tyrant; that from these may
grow
A hundredfold, who, having learnt thy
way,
Early may fly the Babylonian woe."

Is there not more in it than the Hebrew prophet or psalmist and the English Puritan? Is there not, for us now, something beside the past of which Milton had read, and the present which he knew by experience? Is there not an anticipation of another struggle against another tyrant—nay, the creation of the very spirit in which that struggle was to be faced? So Milton influences Wordsworth and the England of Wordsworth's day; and they in their turn inevitably influence our minds as we read him. There lies one part of the secret of his greatness; a part which is seen at its highest in his sonnets.

CHAPTER IV

PARADISE LOST

PARADISE LOST is in several ways one of the most wonderful of the works of man. And not least in the circumstances of its composition. The Restoration found Milton blind, and to blindness it added disappointment, defeat, obscurity, and fear of the public or private revenge of his victorious enemies. Yet out of such a situation as this the most indomitable will that ever inhabited the soul of a poet produced three great poems, every one of which would have been enough to give him a place among the poets who belong to the whole world.

The first and greatest of these was, of course, *Paradise Lost*. Unlike many great poems, but like all the great epics of the world, it obtained recognition at once. It sold well for a work of its bulk and seriousness, and it received the highest praise from those whose word was and deserved to be law in questions of literature. Throughout the eighteenth

century its fame and popularity increased. Literary people read it because Dryden and Addison and all the established authorities recommended it to them, and also because those of them whose turn for literature was a reality found that these recommendations were confirmed by their own experience. But the poem also appealed to another and a larger public. To the serious world it appeared to be a religious book and as such enjoyed the great advantage of being thought fit to be read on the only day in the week on which many people were accustomed to read at all. This distinction grew in importance with the progress of the Wesleyan revival and with it grew the number of Milton's admirers. When Sunday readers were tired of the Bible they were apt to turn to *Paradise Lost*. How many of them did so is proved by the influence Milton has had on English religious beliefs. To this day if an ordinary man is asked to give his recollections of the story of Adam and Eve he is sure to put Milton as well as Genesis into them. For instance, the Miltonic Satan is almost sure to take the place of the scriptural serpent. The influence Milton has had is unfortunately also seen in less satisfactory ways. He claimed to justify the ways of God to men. Perhaps he did so to his own mind

which, in these questions, was curiously matter-of-fact, literal, legal and unmystical. He was determined to explain everything and provide for all contingencies by his legal instrument of the government of the world : and he did so after the cold fashion of a lawyer defining rights on each side, and assuming that the stronger party will exert his strength. So far as his genius made his readers accept his views of the relation between God and man it cannot be denied that he did a great injury to English religious thought. Everybody who stops to reflect now feels that the attitude of his God to the rebel angels and to man is hard and unforgiving, below the standard of any decent human morality, far below the Christian charity of St. Paul. The atmosphere of the poem when it deals with these matters is often suggestive of a tyrant's attorney-general whose business is to find plausible excuses for an arbitrary despot. Milton had his share in creating that bad sort of fear of God which is always appearing as the thorn in the theological rose-bed of the eighteenth century, and, later on, becomes the nightmare of the Evangelical revival. None of these conceptions, the capricious despot, the remorseless creditor, the Judge whose in-

variable sentence is hell fire, have proved easy to get rid of : and part of their permanence may be laid to the account of *Paradise Lost*.

But Milton, who is like the Bible in so many ways, is not least like it in his happy unconseiousness of his own immorality. The writer of the story of Samuel and Agag, or that of Rebekah and Jacob, was perfectly unaware that he was immoral : and so was Milton in *Paradise Lost* : and so also and for that very reason were the majority of their readers. Happily most of us when we read a book that makes for righteousness are like children reading Shakspeare, who simply do not notice the things that make their elders nervous. It is not that we refuse the evil and choose the good : we are quite unaware of the presence of the evil at all. No doubt that sometimes makes its influence the more powerful because unpereceived : and for this kind of subtle influence both Milton and the Old Testament have to answer. But with many happy natures an escape is made by the process of selection : and, as they manage to acquire the God-fearing righteousness of the Old Testament without its ferocity, so they manage to receive from Milton his high emotional consciousness of life as the glad and

free service of God and to ignore altogether his intellectual description of it as a very one-sided bargain with a very dangerous Potentate.

Nor must Milton be made, as he often is, to bear more blame in this matter than he deserves. Divine tyranny with hell as its sanction was no invention of his. The Catholic Church, as all her art shows, had always made full use of it. And the new horror of his own day, the Calvinist predestination, he expressly and frequently repudiates. The free will of man is the very base of his system. In it men may suffer, as it seems to us, out of all proportion to their guilt; but at least they suffer only for deeds done of their own free will.

But the true answer to the charge of corrupting English religious thought so often brought against Milton is that while the harm he did must be admitted it was far outweighed by the good. It could not be for nothing that generations of readers, as they turned over Milton's pages, found themselves listening to the voice of a man to whom God's presence was the most constant of realities, the most active of daily and hourly influences: who, from his youth up, visibly glowed with an ardent desire for the service of God and man: who, whatever his faults were, had nothing

base or mean about him, habitually thought of life as a thing to be lived on the heights, and by his exalted spirit and unconquerable will enlarges for those who know him the whole conception of what a human being may achieve. It could not be for nothing that on the topmost heights of English poetry stood a man who could scarcely finish a single one of his poems without some soaring ascent to heaven and heavenly things : whose most characteristic utterances for himself are such lines as

“ Toward which Time leads me, and the will
of Heaven ” ;

or—

“ As ever in my great Task-Master’s eye : ”

and for others as well as for himself such a hope as that which concludes his *At a Solemn Music*—

“ O, may we soon again renew that song,
And keep in tune with Heaven, till God
ere long
To his celestial concert us unite,
To live with Him, and sing in endless morn
of light ! ”

Tu habes Deum prae oculis tuis, says the author of *The Imitation* : “ Have thou God

before 'Thine eyes.'" And so by his poetry and by his life says Milton. The influence of such a man, whatever the faults of his intellectual creed, can hardly on the whole have been anything but a good one, either on those who heard his living voice or on those who for two hundred years have caught what they may of it from the printed pages of his books.

So much it seemed worth while to say in defence of Milton whose sins in these matters have always been exaggerated by his ecclesiastical and political opponents. But the effect, good or bad, which a great poem produces on opinion is a mere by-product: its essential business is nothing of that sort but the production in the minds of competent readers of the pleasure proper to a great work of the imagination. And this is the criterion by which the *Paradise Lost*, like every other work of the kind, must primarily be judged.

The poem, as we have it, is the long delayed result of an intention formed in Milton's strangely ripe and resolute youth. Before he was thirty he spoke openly to his friends of writing a great poem which was, as he shortly afterwards had no hesitation in telling the public, to be of the sort that the world does not willingly let die. At first the subject was to have been the Arthurian legend which

poets of all ages have found so fruitful. But that was soon abandoned, apparently for the reason that a little examination of the authorities convinced the poet that it was not historically true. This fact has a literary as well as a biographical importance. Great artist as Milton was, he seems to have confused truth of art with truth of fact. He preferred a Biblical subject because it was his belief that every statement in the Bible was literally true. This belief, except from the emotional fervour it inspired in him, was a positive disadvantage to him as a poet. It circumscribed his freedom of invention, it compelled him to argue that the action of his drama as he found it was already reasonable and probable instead of letting his imagination work upon it and make it so; it made him aim too often at producing belief instead of delight in his hearers. This, of course, had obvious drawbacks as soon as people ceased to regard the first chapters of Genesis as a literal prose record of events which actually happened. For a hundred and fifty years many people read the *Paradise Lost* and supposed themselves to be enjoying the poem when what they were really enjoying was simply the pleasure of reading their own beliefs expressed in magnificent verse. In the same way many

religious people imagine that they enjoy early Italian art when they in fact enjoy nothing but its religious sentiment. But neither art nor poetry can live permanently on these extraneous supports. So when less interest came to be felt in Adam and Eve there were fewer readers for *Paradise Lost*. But the readers who were lost were not those that matter. For it is a complete mistake to say, as is sometimes said, that the fact that the story of *Paradise Lost* was once believed and now is so no longer is fatal to the interest of the poem. That is not so for the right reader: or at least, so far as it is so, it is Milton's fault and not that of his subject. The *Æneid* loses no more by our disbelief in the historical reality of Æneas or Dido than *Othello* loses by our ignorance whether such a person ever existed. The difficulty, so far as there is one, is not that many readers disbelieve the story of Milton's poem: it is that he himself passionately believed it. If he had been content with offering us his poem as an imaginative creation, if he had not again and again insisted on its historical truth and theological importance, no changes in the views of his readers, no merely intellectual or historical criticism, could have touched him more than they can Virgil. As a poet he is

perfectly invulnerable by any such attacks : it is only so far as he deserted poetry for the pseudo-scientific matter-of-fact world of prose that he fails and irritates us. All the poetry of *Paradise Lost* is as true to-day as when it was first written : it is only the science and logic and philosophy, in a word the prose, which has proved liable to decay. There is always that difference between the works of the imagination and those of the intellect. A hundred theories about the Greek legends of the Centaurs or the Amazons may establish themselves, have a vogue, undergo criticism and finally be exploded as absurdities : that is the common fate of intellectual products after they have done their work. But the Centaurs of the Parthenon and the Amazons of the Mausoleum are immortally independent of all changes of opinion.

This is the first disadvantage of the subject chosen by Milton, that he believed in it too much. The fact that he did so and thought its prose truth all-important at once limited the freedom of his imagination and diverted him from the single-minded pursuit of the proper end of poetry. He was evidently quite unaware of this drawback and it has been little, if at all, noticed by his critics.

On the other hand, he was perfectly aware of what would appear to other people to be the disadvantages involved in the choice of a subject so unlike those of previous epics. He speaks more than once of the novelty of this theme, the best-known allusion being the beautiful introduction to Book IX., in which he describes his subject, that of the human sin and the divine anger

“ That brought into this World a world of
 woe,
 Sin and her shadow Death, and Misery,
 Death’s harbinger : ”

and contrasts it with those other sins and other angers on which Homer and Virgil built their poems. But he is not afraid of the contrast : he thinks it is all to his own advantage—

“ Sad task ! yet argument
 Not less but more heroic than the wrath
 Of stern Achilles on his foe pursued
 Thrice fugitive about Troy wall ; or rage
 Of Turnus for Lavinia disespoused ;
 Or Neptune’s ire or Juno’s, that so long
 Perplexed the Greek, and Cytherea’s son :
 If answerable style I can obtain
 Of my celestial Patroness who deigns
 Her nightly visitation unimplored,
 And dictates to me slumbering, or inspires
 Easy my unpremeditated verse,

Since first this subject for heroic song
Pleased me, long choosing and beginning
late,
Not sedulous by nature to indite
Wars, hitherto the only argument
Heroic deemed—”

The whole passage is too long for quotation. Indeed, as we have already had occasion to notice, it is one of the difficulties of discussing Milton that quotation is almost always compelled to do him an injury by giving less than the whole of any one of those long-sustained flights of music in which he rises and falls, turns to the left hand or the right, as his imagination leads him, but always on unflagging wings of undoubted and easy security. But enough has been quoted here to illustrate the poet's direct challenge of Homer and Virgil in this matter of subject. He was perfectly well aware that he was making an entirely new departure, not only from the subject of the ancients but also, as is shown by his detailed condemnation of “tilting furniture, emblazoned shields” and the rest, from those of such poets as Ariosto, Tasso and Spenser. He did it deliberately, with open eyes. And there is no doubt that he was at least partly right. To this day he and Dante, in their different ways, enjoy a common advantage

over Homer, and still more over a poet mainly of fancy like Tasso, in the fact that their subject, that of the meaning and destiny of human life, is one in itself of profound and absorbing interest to all thinking men and women. Even if their treatment of it be in some parts and for some people unsatisfying or irritating they at least have started with that advantage. A dangerous advantage because, as we have seen in Milton's case and might also see in Dante's, tempting them to go outside the pure business of their art; but still in itself an advantage. Milton was probably also right in feeling that the fighting element in the old poets had been greatly overdone. The most interesting parts of the *Iliad* for us to-day are not battles, but such things as the parting of Hector and Andromache and the scene between Priam and Achilles. Where the fighting still moves us, as in the case of Hector and Achilles, or Virgil's Turnus and Pallas, it is mainly for the sake of an accompanying human and moral interest altogether above its own. The miscellaneous details of weapons and wounds which evidently once gave so much pleasure are now equally tedious to us whether it is Homer or Malory or Morris who narrates them. They can no longer give interest: they can only receive it

from such intrinsic interest as may belong to the combatants.

So far Milton had some justification for preferring his own subject to those of Homer and Virgil. But, so far as we can judge, he was entirely unconscious of its disadvantages : as well of those which it shares with the *Iliad* and *Æneid* as of those peculiar to itself. Of the former, the most conspicuous is that inevitably involved in the introduction of divine persons into the action. Everybody feels that Homer's gods constantly spoil the interest and probability of his story, while very rarely enhancing its dignity. One never understands why they can do so much, and yet do no more, to affect the action. Their interference is always irritating, generally immoral, and on the whole ineffective. Their omnipotence is occasional and irrational : they are limited in the use of it by each other, and all alike, even Zeus, are limited by a shadowy Law or Fate in the background. Their interventions only make the struggle seem unfair or unreal, and we are glad to be rid of them.

Milton is still more deeply involved in the same difficulty. All his personages except two are superhuman. It is his great disadvantage as compared with Dante that the

main lines of his story are all scriptural and therefore outside the influence of his invention, that his actors are divine, angelic, or sinless beings, and therefore such as can provide little of the uncertainty of issue or variety of temper and experience which are the stuff of drama. He is hampered by having constantly to assert the true free will and responsibility of Satan for his rebellion and of Adam for his disobedience, even to the extent of putting argumentative soliloquies confessing it into their own mouths. So far he succeeds : both are felt to be free in their fatal choice. But the war in heaven can arouse no interest because its issue is obviously foregone, and much of the action of the rebel angels necessarily conflicts with the frequent statements that they can do nothing except as permitted by their Conqueror. At one moment they know their powerlessness, at another they hope for revenge and victory. These are grave difficulties which deprive large parts of the poem of that illusion of probability or truth without which poetry cannot do its proper work. A further difficulty, from which ancient poets were free, arises from the purely intellectual and spiritual nature of the Christian God. It is as if Homer had had to deal with the divine unity of Plato instead of

with his family of loving, quarrelling, fighting gods and goddesses. A being who is Incomprehensible as well as Almighty and Omniscent can hardly be an actor in a poem written for human readers. The gods in the *Iliad* shock us because they are too like ourselves : Milton's God may sometimes shock us too : but He is more often in danger of fatiguing us by His utter remoteness from our experience, by His dwelling not merely, not indeed so often as we could wish, in clouds and darkness, but in a world of theological mysteries which necessarily lose more in sublimity than they gain in clearness by being perpetually discussed and explained. Dante's poem is at least as full as Milton's of obscure theological doctrines and attempts at their explanation ; but, either by virtue of the plan of the *Divina Commedia* or by some finer instinct of reserve and reverence in the poet, we never find ourselves in Dante as we do in Milton exercising our critical faculties, whether we will or no, on the very words of God Himself. If we reject an argument as unconvincing or fallacious, it is on Virgil or Statius, Beatrice or Thomas Aquinas, that we sit in judgment. The Divine Mind, intensely and constantly felt as its presence is from the first canto of the poem to the last, is yet felt always as from behind a

curtain which can never be raised for the sight of mortal eyes.

Still, it must be admitted that, impossible as was the task of making the Infinite and Eternal an actor and speaker in a human poem, Milton's very failure in it is sublime. His prodigious powers are nowhere more wonderfully displayed than in trying to do what no one, not even himself, could do. The second half of his third book, for instance, is far more interesting than the first, but it may well be doubted whether the mere fact of his accomplishing the first at all is not a greater proof of his poetic genius. Nowhere does that unfailing certainty of style, in which he has scarcely an equal among the poets of the whole world, stand him in such astonishing stead as in these difficult dialogues in heaven.

“ Father, thy word is passed, Man shall find
 grace ;
And shall Grace not find means, that finds
 her way,
The speediest of thy wingèd messengers.
To visit all thy creatures, and to all
Comes unprevented, unimplored, unsought ?
Happy for Man, so coming ; ”

On the side of invention there is nothing remarkable ; but, on the side of art, what a

divine graciousness there is in its tone and manner; what incomparable skill in the management of the verse! Note the quiet monosyllabic beginning, taking note, as it were, of the decree of mercy, and then the expansion of it, the loving voice pressing forward in freer movement as it confidently proclaims the happy results that cannot fail to follow. And observe the peculiarly Miltonic interlacing of the whole, line leading to line and word to word: the "grace" of the first line giving the key to the "grace" of the second, the repeated "find" of the second line and the repeated "all" of the fourth, the "comes" of the fifth line leading on to the "coming" of the sixth. To make a list of such details as these is not to explain the effect which they produce; that is the secret of Milton's genius. So is that cunning variety in the rhythm of the verses: three pauses in the first line, two in the second, only one in the third: the principal pause after the sixth syllable in both the first two lines, and yet the words and their accents so artfully varied that not the slightest monotony is felt; the suggestion of easy flight in the smooth unbroken movement of the third line—

“The speediest of thy wingèd messengers.”

Milton knew that an utterance of this kind, in which the Bible had anticipated him a hundred times, admitted of no novelty in itself : and his reverence forbade him to give his invention free rein in these high matters. But what he could do he did. The matter of the speech he leaves as he found it ; what the Son says every reader has heard before : but after this manner he has not heard it. In passing through Milton's hands all has been transformed into a new birth by the consummate craftsmanship of a supreme artist.

Thus the poet escapes, as far as it was possible to escape, from the difficulties created for him by his acceptance of divine Persons as actors in his drama. But the escape could only be partial. It is true that as Johnson says, " whatever be done the poet is always great " : but greatness of style often struggles in vain against the incongruity of a verbose and argumentative Deity. Such gods as Virgil's Venus and Juno may hurl rhetorical speeches at each other without much ill effect, but we feel that it was a lack of the sense of mystery in Milton that kept him from realizing that the one God, Creator, Father and Judge of all, cannot with fitness debate or argue : He can only decree. " Let thy words be few " ; that is even truer, we

instinctively feel, of words put into His mouth than of words addressed to Him. Milton's God suffers even more than Shakspeare's Ghosts from a garrulity which destroys the sense of the awe properly belonging to a supernatural being; and the grim laughter of the Miltonic heaven is in its different way even more fatal to that awe than the Jack-in-the-box appearances and disappearances of the dead Hamlet and Banquo.

Such are some of the difficulties, in part overcome by the poet and in part unperceived, inherent in the subject of *Paradise Lost*. One more, the greatest of all, remains. Poetry is a human art and its subject is human life. In the story Milton set himself to tell there are only two human figures; and how can they, living as they do in isolated perfection and sinlessness, without children or friends, without learning or art or business, without hopes or fears or memories, without the experience of disease or the expectation of death, and therefore without the joy, as we know it, of life and health, how can they provide material for a poem that can interest beings so utterly unlike them as ourselves? The answer is twofold. It is partly that they do fail to provide that material. The *Paradise Lost* has in fact far less of ordinary human life in

it, far less variety of action, than the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. This was probably unavoidable but it was probably also Milton's deliberate intention. It was not his nature to care much about the small doings of ordinary people in everyday life. The line which he most often repeats in *Paradise Lost* is the very opposite of those which are repeated so often in the *Iliad*, verses of no noticeable poetic quality, just doing their plain duty of linking two speeches or two paragraphs together: such as—

ὥς οἱ μὲν τοιαῦτα πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἀγόρευον.

What Milton chooses for repetition is, on the other hand, one of his stateliest lines, the magnificent—

“Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues,
Powers.”

The choice is characteristic of the man. His “natural port,” as Johnson well said, “is gigantic loftiness,” and his end to “raise the thoughts above sublunary cares or pleasures.” So it may well be that this disadvantage of his subject did not weigh with him as much as it would have done with most poets. But he was not altogether blind to it, and the amazing skill he shows in partly getting over it is the other half of the answer to

the question asked just now. His action up to the moment of the Fall is the inhuman one of a few days in hell, heaven, and a small sinless spot of earth : and the Fall does not increase the number of actors. Yet into the mouths of this tiny group of persons Milton may be said to have brought all the history of the world and all its geography, art, science and learning, the Jew, the Christian and the Pagan, Greck philosophy and Roman politics, classical myth, mediæval romance, and even the contemporary life of his own experience. This is partly done, as Virgil had done it, by the way of a prophecy of future ages : but to a much greater extent by the way of similes which are more elaborate and learned in Milton than in any poet. By their assistance he gives rest to the imagination exhausted by the sublimity of heaven and hell, bringing it home to its own familiar earth, to scenes whose charm, unlike that of Eden or Pandemonium, lies not in the wonder their strangeness excites but in the old habits, experiences and memories which they recall. So, after the strain of the great debate with which the second book opens, he soothes us with the beautiful simile of the evening after storm—

“ Thus they their doubtful consultations dark
Ended, rejoicing in their matchless Chief ;

As, when from mountain-tops the dusky
clouds
Ascending, while the North-wind sleeps,
o'erspread
Heaven's cheerful face, the louring ele-
ment
Scowls o'er the darkened landskip snow
or shower,
If chance the radiant sun, with farewell
sweet,
Extend his evening beam, the fields revive,
The birds their notes renew, and bleating
herds
Attest their joy, that hill and valley rings."

Note how large and general it is. Its method is the classical appeal to universal knowledge and feeling, not the romantic method of strangeness of sentiment and detailed particularity of truth. Matthew Arnold once recommended those who cannot read Greek or Latin to read Milton as a far better key than any translation can be to the secret of the greatness of the ancient poets. This is the truth : and not only for the reason on which Arnold laid just stress—the "sure and flawless perfection of rhythm and diction" in which, as he truly says, Milton is unique among English poets : but also for his classical habit of mind, for his central sanity, for the sureness with which he makes his call on the thoughts and emotions, not of eccentric

or exceptional individuals, but of the men and women of all times and all nations.

Yet he can use his similes, as we said, to introduce the life of his own day and still generally carry his classical manner with him. So in the following simile he begins with the Homeric wolf and ends with the Roman and Laudian clergy. Satan has leapt over the wall of Paradise : and the simile begins—

“ As when a prowling wolf,
Whom hunger drives to seek new haunt for
prey,
Watching where shepherds pen their flocks at
eve

In hurdled cotes amid the field secure,
Leaps o’er the fence with case into the fold :
Or as a thief bent to unhoard the cash
Of some rich burgher, whose substantial doors,
Cross-barred and bolted fast, fear no assault,
In at the window climbs, or o’er the tiles :
So clomb this first grand Thief into God’s
fold :

So since into his Church lewd hirelings climb.”

The last line smacks perhaps more of the angry pamphleteer than fits with classical sanity : but how admirably the London citizen’s house gives vivid reality to the beautiful remoteness of the wolf which English shepherds had long forgotten to fear ; how the recollection, present to every reader’s

mind, of that very same simile in the Gospel of St. John, prepares the way for its religious application here : how the attention is seized by that magnificent line of arresting monosyllables, each heavy with the sense of fate—

“ So clomb this first grand Thief into God’s
fold ! ”

It used to be said that Milton uses monosyllables to express slowness of action. But that is notably not the case here. And in the main it seems that he uses them, as Shakspeare often did, for expressing the solemnity of grave crisis, or for deep emotion, when anything fanciful, ornate or verbose would be fatal to the simplicity, akin to silence, which all men find fitting at great moments. So Shakspeare makes Kent say at Lear’s death—

“ Vex not his ghost ; O let him pass ! he hates
him

That would upon the rack of this tough
world

Stretch him out longer.”

And so Milton uses these tremendous monosyllables, like a bell tolling into the silence of midnight, to force our attention on the doom of all the world that took its beginning when Satan entered Paradise—

“ So clomb this first grand Thief into God’s fold.”

So again, with less solemnity as befitting a less awful person but still with arresting and delaying emphasis, he records the actual eating of the fatal apple—

“ she plucked, she eat :
Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her
seat,
Sighing through all her works, gave signs of
woe.
That all was lost.”

So he suspends the flow of the richest and most elaborate of his similes by the slow-moving monosyllables of

“ which cost Ceres all that pain
To seek her through the world : ”

So he strikes the deepest note, beyond all politics, of his debate in hell :

“ And that must end us; that must be our
cure—
To be no more : ”

So again he closes the first Act of *Paradise Regained* with a verse of solitary awe—

“ And now wild beasts come forth the woods
to roam.”

But to return to the similes. Milton uses them, as we have seen, to introduce things familiar and contemporary into the remote and majestic theme of his poem. But he also uses them to introduce the whole world into Eden, all later history into the beginning of the world, all the varied glories of art and war, poetry and legend, with which his memory was stored, into an action which was only partly human and provided no scope at all for any human activities except of the most primitive order. So the palace of Hell is, he tells us, something far beyond the magnificence of "Babylon, or great Alcairo"; and the army of rebel angels far exceeds those

"That fought at Thebes and Ilium, on each
side

Mixed with auxiliar gods; and what resounds

In fable or romance of Uther's son,
Begirt with British and Armoric knights;
And all who since, baptized or infidel,
Jousted in Aspramont or Montalban,
Damasco, or Marocco or Trebisonde,
Or whom Biserta sent from Afric shore,
When Charlemain with all his peerage fell
By Fontarabbia."

So, in another of his returns to those tales and fancies of the Middle Age which, in spite

of his intellectual and moral rejection of their falsity, yet always moved him to unusual beauty of verse, he compares the dwarfed rebels of Hell to the

“faery elves,
Whose midnight revels, by a forest side
Or fountain, some belated peasant sees,
Or dreams he sees, while overhead the
Moon
Sits arbitress, and nearer to the Earth
Wheels her pale course; they, on their
mirth and dance
Intent, with jocund music charm his ear;
At once with joy and fear his heart
rebounds.”

So Eve at her gardening recalls Pales, or
Pomona or

“Ceres in her prime,
Yet virgin of Proserpina from Jove.”

And so, in an earlier book, the beauty of Paradise itself, too great to be directly told, is, like the splendour of Pandemonium, conveyed to us by the most perfect of those negative similes which, forced upon Milton by the narrow bounds of his story, are perhaps the most distinctive of all the glories of *Paradise Lost*. It is too long to quote in full: but a few lines may be given: and they must include the first four, one of which has just

been quoted, verses of such amazing beauty that, if Milton could be represented by four lines, these might well be the chosen four—

“ Not that fair field
Of Enna, where Proserpin gathering flowers,
Herself a fairer flower, by gloomy Dis
Was gathered, which cost Ceres all that pain
To seek her through the world ; nor that sweet
grove
Of Daphne by Orontes, and the inspired
Castalian spring, might with this Paradise
Of Eden strive.”

But it is time to leave Milton's similes, though similes play a more important part in *Paradise Lost* than in any other epic. Indeed their necessary absence is a great element in the comparative dulness of the books given over to the discourses of Raphael and Michael. A single chapter in a little book of this kind can only deal with one or two aspects of so great a subject as *Paradise Lost*. That being so, it is best, perhaps, to touch on points in which Milton stands pre-eminent or unique. The similes are one of these. Another is the splendour of the Miltonic speeches. It is one of the defects of *Paradise Lost* that its actors are seldom soldiers whom all the ages agree to admire, and often theologians whom all fear or dislike, or politicians whom all obey

and despise. Yet how magnificently Milton turns this weakness into a strength! His speeches have not the eternal humanity of Homer's: but as oratory, above all as debating oratory, they have no poetic rivals outside the drama. The poet who had lived through the Long Parliament and the trial of Strafford knew the art of speech as Homer could not know it. It may seem strange to us that the political struggle of his day affected him so much more than the military; but the fact is so. Pym and Hampden are felt in *Paradise Lost* far more than Fairfax or Cromwell. The speeches of the second book could only have been written by the citizen of a free state who had lived through a crisis in its fortunes. Other speeches in the poem—that incomparable one of Eve to Adam in the fourth book, “Sweet is the breath of morn,” those that pass between Eve and Adam after the Fall and Adam’s Job-like lament in the tenth book—have a purer human beauty about them: but of the oratory of debate no poem in the world provides a more magnificent display than the second book of *Paradise Lost*. The debate is a real debate. The opening of Moloch, “My sentence is for open war,” would be instantly effective in any Parliament in the world. It

rouses attention by its directness, it compels adherence as only courage can. To undo its effect Belial has to employ the most subtle of all oratorical arts, that of accepting the arguments which he dare not directly combat and then gradually turning them to the confusion of their author. So he and Mammon bring the assembly completely round to the mood of ease and acquiescence. Then follows the tremendous figure of Beelzebub, an aged Chatham or Gladstone, who

“ in his rising seemed
A pillar of state. Deep on his front engraven
Deliberation sat and public care ;
And princely counsel in his face yet shone,
Majestic though in ruin. Sage he stood,
With Atlantean shoulders fit to bear
The weight of mightiest monarchies ; his look
Drew audience and attention still as night,
Or summer’s noon-tide air.”

Yet Milton’s consciousness of the situation as it really would be is such that Beelzebub does not dare to revive Moloch’s defeated policy of war. To talk of fighting to cowed rebels who have just been taught the too pleasant lesson of the folly of further resistance would have been useless. So he begins by telling them that the ease promised to them is a delusion : they may submit, but submission

will never win them peace, or deliver them from their victorious enemy. Peace, then, they cannot have; and must have war: but it need not be open or dangerous: craft has its weapons as well as force: "what if we find Some easier enterprise" than the perilous folly of assaulting heaven?

Such a sketch may just serve to show that the great debate is a living thing in which we feel the temper of the audience submitting to the successive orators and in its turn reacting upon them. Another proof of the actuality of Milton's oratory is the way in which it can be quoted.

"I give not Heaven for lost:"

"Which, if not victory, is yet revenge:"

"What though the field be lost?
All is not lost; the unconquerable will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield,
And what is else not to be overcome:"

"what peace can we return
But, to our power, hostility and hate?"

"This would surpass
Common revenge, and interrupt his joy
In our confusion:"

“Advise if this be worth
Attempting, or to sit in darkness here
Hatching vain empires:”

“What reinforcement we may gain from hope,
If not, what resolution from despair:”

“on whom we send
The weight of all and our last hope relies:”

“This enterprise
None shall partake with me.”

All these have been or could well be hurled by contending Parliamentarians across the table of the House of Commons, often with a fine irony, the Miltonic magnificence emphasizing the pettiness of the ordinary political squabbles. But, of course, the theological questions which are at the root of Milton's debate make many of the arguments inapplicable to politics: indeed, what is probably the most remembered passage in all the speeches has nothing to do with social or political activities but draws its poignant interest from the secret thoughts that visit the hearts of men when they are most alone—

“And that must end us; that must be our
cure,
To be no more. Sad cure! for who would
lose,
Though full of pain, this intellectual being,

Those thoughts that wander through
eternity,
To perish rather, swallowed up and lost
In the wide womb of uncreated Night,
Devoid of sense and motion ? ”

Here we obviously go outside the dramatic probabilities : it is no longer Belial who is speaking : it is the voice of a highly cultivated and intellectual human being with all Greek thought behind him ; it is, in short, Milton himself. The whole poem is full of such autobiographical confessional passages, either indirect like this or open and undisguised like the great introductions to the first, third, seventh and ninth books. This constant intervention of the poet in his epic is one of the originalities of *Paradise Lost*, and certainly not the least successful. The passages which are due to it have been criticized as irregularities or superfluities, but, as Johnson justly asked, “ superfluities so beautiful who would take away ? ” Homer may be said never to allow us to do more than guess obscurely at what he himself was or thought or felt : so leaving room for the follies of the criticism which supposes him to be a kind of limited company of poets. Virgil spoke directly to his readers at least once in the *Æneid*, in the most magnificent, and

most magnificently fulfilled, of all the poetic promises of eternal fame—

“Fortunati ambo! Si quid mea carmina
possunt
Nulla dies unquam memori vos eximet ævo
Dum domus Æneæ Capitoli immobile
saxum
Accolet imperiumque pater Romanus habebit.”

But it is less in such a direct intervention as this than in the whole tone and temper of his poem that he reveals to us his delicate and beautiful nature. Milton confesses himself in both ways. His high seriousness, his proud and resolute will, his grave sadness at the folly of mankind, are interwoven in the whole of his story. Then in the speeches he will often, as in this of Belial, forget altogether who is speaking and where and when, forget Satan and Adam, Eden and Hell, and make his human escape to his own time and country and to himself. The extreme limitations of his subject made something of this kind almost necessary. When all had been done that simile and prophecy could do to bring in the life of men and women as Milton's readers knew it there still remained the difficulty that Adam and his angel visitors must talk, and that before the Fall there was almost

nothing for them to talk about. So they constantly talk as if they had all history behind them and the world's processes were to them, as to us, old and familiar things. "War seemed a civil game To this uproar," says Raphael, as if he were fresh from reading Livy or Gibbon and had all the wars of Europe and Asia in his memory. Often Milton calls attention, as it were, to his own inconsistencies, putting in an apology like that of Michael when he talks to Adam about Hamath and Hermon—

"Things by their names I call though yet unnamed ;"

but more often he leaves them unexplained, perhaps not even noticing them himself. These difficulties are seen at their worst in the very earthly geography of heaven and its very unheavenly military operations : and, interesting as the passages are, it is difficult to forget the incongruity of Raphael and Adam discussing the Ptolemaic and Copernican theories of the universe, or Adam moralizing on the unhappiness of marriage as if he had studied the divorce reports or gone through a course of modern novels. Yet few and foolish are the readers who can dwell on dramatic improbabilities when Adam

is pouring out the bitter cry wrung from Milton by the still unforgotten miseries of his first marriage—

“ Oh ! why did God,
 Creator wise, that peopled highest Heaven
 With Spirits masculine, create at last
 This novelty on Earth, this fair defect
 Of Nature, and not fill the World at once
 With men as Angels, without feminine,
 Or find some other way to generate
 Mankind ? This mischief had not then be-
 fallen,
 And more that shall befall ; innumerable
 Disturbances on Earth through female snares,
 And strait conjunction with this sex. For
 either
 He never shall find out fit mate, but such
 As some misfortune brings him, or mistake ;
 Or whom he wishes most shall seldom gain,
 Through her perverseness, but shall see her
 gained
 By a far worse, or, if she love, withheld
 By parents ; or his happiest choice too late
 Shall meet, already linked and wedlock-
 bound
 To a fell adversary, his hate or shame ;
 Which infinite calamity shall cause
 To human life, and household peace con-
 found.”

It is obvious that in all this we hear the poet's own voice. But it is scarcely fair to quote it without pointing out that it must

not be taken alone. The common notion that Milton's own melancholy experience had made him a purblind misogynist is a complete mistake. No one has praised marriage as he has. The chastest of poets is as little afraid as the Prayer Book of frank acceptance of the physical facts which must commonly be the basis of its spiritual relation. It is the whole union for which he stands, of body, mind, and spirit. He puts into the mouth of this same Adam the most eloquent praise woman ever received, culminating in

“ All higher Knowledge in her presence falls
Degraded. Wisdom in discourse with her
Loses discountenanced, and like Folly shows;
Authority and Reason on her wait,
As one intended first, not after made
Occasionally : and, to consummate all,
Greatness of mind and nobleness their seat
Build in her loveliest, and create an awe
About her, as a guard angelic placed.”

It is true that the reply of the Angel moderating these ardours is more evidently Miltonic—

“ what transports thee so ?
An outside ? fair no doubt and worthy well
Thy cherishing, thy honouring, and thy love ;
Not thy subjection. Weigh with her thyself ;
Then value. Oft-times nothing profits more
Than self-esteem, grounded on just and right.”

But, though in these last words Raphael entirely disappears in Milton, the poet who could conceive the panegyric to which Raphael replies, who could elsewhere make his hero say that he received "access in every virtue" from the looks of Eve, had assuredly no low ideal of what a woman may be. Adam speaks for him when he praises love as

"not the lowest end of human life;"

and he gives us a true corrective of the over-severe picture of Milton which half-knowledge is apt to draw when he goes on to declare that

"not to irksome toil, but to delight,
He made us, and delight to reason joined."

But this is only one of many subjects on which Milton lets us hear his own voice speaking through his characters. We hear it when Satan cries to Beelzebub—

"Fallen Cherub, to be weak is miserable,
Doing or suffering:"

when Raphael reports Nisroch as saying of pain and pleasure what may well have been felt by the blind poet who owed his knowledge of pleasure to memory only, while he knew

pain by the frequent experience of one of the most painful of diseases—

“ sense of pleasure we may well
Spare out of life, perhaps, and not repine,
But live content, which is the calmest life;
But pain is perfect misery, the worst
Of evils, and, excessive, overturns
All patience : ”

we hear it when Adam, like a weary scholar,
says that

“ not to know at large of things remote
From use, obscure and subtle, but to know
That which before us lies in daily life,
Is the prime wisdom ; ”

when Raphael asks, like a Platonic philosopher,

“ what if Earth
Be but the shadow of Heaven, and things
therein
Each to other like, more than on Earth is
thought ? ”

when Adam, like a doubting Christian in an age of speculation, hesitates for a moment about the efficacy of prayer—

“ that from us aught should ascend to
Heaven
So prevalent as to concern the mind
Of God high-blest, or to incline his will,
Hard to belief may seem : ”

and once more when Adam cries—

“solitude sometimes is best society,”

as if he, like the blind Milton, was worn out by twenty years of contending voices, and longed for the relief of silent and lonely thought.

To the direct interventions of the poet there is less need to call attention as, of course, no reader can miss them. They are probably the most universally admired passages of the poem. Every reader who deserves to read them at all finds himself unable to do so without wishing to get them by heart. They do not rival the daring splendour of the scenes in hell: nor perhaps the suave and gracious perfection of the evening scene in Paradise in the fourth book; nor can they, of course, exhibit the dramatic power of the scene that precedes and still more of those that follow the Fall. But nothing in the whole poem moves us so much. It is not merely that Milton has exerted his whole mastery of his art to make their every line and every word please the ear, awaken the memory, stimulate the imagination, lift the whole mental and emotional nature of the reader up to a height of being unknown to its ordinary experience. This he has

done in some other parts of his poem. But, fine as some of his dramatic touches are, the essence of his genius was lyrical and not dramatic or objective at all. And so none of his characters, divine, diabolic or human, will ever move us quite as he moves us himself.

Let us hear the most beautiful of all these confessions: and for once let us indulge ourselves with the whole. The themes that make up Milton's great symphony ought in truth always to be given unbroken, if only that were possible. Indeed, there is a sense in which it may be said that nothing less than the whole poem can do justice to a design so majestic as that of *Paradise Lost*. But in any case it is certain that no fragment of a few lines can convey a full impression of the rhythmical, intellectual, imaginative unity of the Miltonic paragraph or section. This is above all conspicuous in the great speeches and in the elaborate introductions that precede the first, third, seventh and ninth books. Here is the greatest of the four; the most famous of Milton's personal interventions in his poem, and one of the most wonderful things he ever wrote.

“Hail, holy Light, offspring of Heaven first-born!

Or of the Eternal coeternal beam

May I express thee unblamed? Since God
is light,
And never but in unapproached light
Dwelt from eternity; dwelt then in thee,
Bright effluence of bright essence increate!
Or hearest thou rather pure Ethereal stream,
Whose fountain who shall tell? Before the
Sun,
Before the Heavens, thou wert, and at the
voice
Of God, as with a mantle, didst invest
The rising World of waters dark and deep,
Won from the void and formless Infinite!
Thee I revisit now with bolder wing,
Escaped the Stygian pool, though long
detained
In that obscure sojourn, while in my flight,
Through utter and through middle Darkness
borne,
With other notes than to the Orphean
lyre,
I sung of Chaos and eternal Night,
Taught by the Heavenly Muse to venture
down
The dark descent, and up to re ascend,
Though hard and rare: thee I revisit
safe,
And feel thy sovran vital lamp; but thou
Revisit'st not these eyes, that roll in vain
To find thy piercing ray, and find no
dawn;
So thick a drop serene hath quenched their
orbs,
Or dim suffusion veiled. Yet not the more
Ccase I to wander where the Muses haunt

Clear spring, or shady grove, or sunny hill,
Smit with the love of sacred song; but chief
Thee, Sion, and the flowery brooks beneath,
That wash thy hallowed feet, and warbling
flow,

Nightly I visit; nor sometimes forget
Those other two equalled with me in fate,
So were I equalled with them in renown,
Blind Thamyras and blind Mæonides,
And Tiresias and Phineus, prophets old:
Then feed on thoughts that voluntary move
Harmonious numbers; as the wakeful bird
Sings darkling, and, in shadiest covert hid,
Tunes her nocturnal note. Thus with the
year

Seasons return; but not to me returns
Day or the sweet approach of even or morn,
Or sight of vernal bloom, or summer's rose,
Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine;
But cloud instead and ever-during dark
Surrounds me, from the cheerful ways of
men

Cut off, and, for the book of knowledge
fair,

Presented with a universal blank
Of Nature's works, to me expunged and
rased,

And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out.
So much the rather thou, Celestial Light,
Shine inward, and the mind through all her
powers

Irradiate; there plant eyes; all mist from
thence

Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
Of things invisible to mortal sight."

Not all the poetry of all the world can produce more than a few passages that equal this in moving power. Tears are not very far from the eye that is passing over its page : tears in which sympathy plays a smaller part than joy at the discovery that human words can be so beautiful. But if Milton moves us more by his own personality than by that of any of his creations, it is still true that he is not so entirely without dramatic power as has sometimes been alleged. No one would claim for him that he was one of the great narrative or dramatic masters. But his weakness on these sides is so obvious that there has been a tendency to exaggerate it. We notice the undramatic speeches of Satan and Adam : we notice such things as Eve's dream in the fifth book which, anticipating, as it does, so many of the details of her temptation, renders her fall much less probable, and goes far to destroy its interest when it occurs. But we are slower to notice the admirable dramatic management of such a scene as that between Eve and the Serpent in the ninth book. And yet how finely imagined it is, in all its successive stages ! Satan, at first "stupidly good," overawed at Eve's beauty and innocence ; then, recovering his natural malice, and beginning his attempt by appealing to

two things, curiosity and the love of flattery, which have always been supposed especially powerful with women; and Eve, taking no direct notice of his compliments and in appearance surrendering only to the other bait of novelty and surprise; "how cam'st thou speakable of mute?" So the scene begins. Flattery has ensured the tempter a favourable reception; curiosity gives him the chance of an apparently telling argument. I ate, he says, of the fruit of a certain tree and received from it speech and reason. But I have found nothing to satisfy my new-won powers till I saw thee, whom I now desire to worship as the sovran of creation. She affects to rebuke the flattery, but naturally asks to be shown the tree on which the wonderful fruit grows. It of course turns out to be the Forbidden Tree: and Eve mentions the prohibition as a thing final and unquestionable. He meets her refusal by giving a sinister and plausible explanation of the prohibition. Why did God forbid her the fruit? "Why, but to keep ye low and ignorant, His worshippers?" God, he suggests, knows too well that as the fruit had raised the serpent from brute to human, so it would raise the woman from human to divine. Noon and hunger come to fortify his argu-

ments; and, after a speech in which she adds one more of her own drawn from the name, the Tree of Knowledge, given to the tree by God Himself, she plucks and eats. In the first ecstasy of pleasure she luxuriates in joy and self-confidence. Then she considers whether she shall use her new powers to make herself the equal and even the superior of Adam. The prospect tempts her: but she is not quite free from fear that the threatened punishment of death may after all descend upon her. And that suggests the picture of "Adam wedded to another Eve," which brings her swiftly to the decision that Adam shall share with her her fate, whichever it be, bliss or woe. In this, as later in her hasty proposal of suicide, Eve is a living and convincing human figure. To the stronger and wiser Adam it was harder to give life. But what could be finer or truer than his instant repudiation of her plausible tale—

"How art thou lost! how on a sudden lost,
Defaced, deflowered, and now to death
devote!"

followed by his immediate resolution to die with her—

"And me with thee hath ruined: for with thee
Certain my resolution is to die.
How can I live without thee?"

The rest follows with equal probability. Once resolved to unite his lot with hers, he soon finds arguments to prove that that lot is not likely after all to be so dreadful. Having talked himself into the surrender of his judgment he eats, and having eaten he goes at once all lengths of extravagance, folly and sin. Then comes the reaction and the inevitable mutual reproaches; with the fine natural touch of Eve upbraiding Adam for his weakness in yielding to her request and granting her the freedom which had proved so fatal. So the ninth book closes. When the story is resumed in the second half of the tenth book we get the tremendous lamentation of Adam, so strangely undramatic in its argumentative justification of his own punishment, so full of true drama as well as of magnificent lyrical power in its cry of human misery and despair. Then follows the bitter attack upon Eve, as the cause of all his woe: and the whole scene is concluded by her humble and beautiful submission—

“ While yet we live, scarce one short hour
perhaps,

Between us two let there be peace : ”

by their reconciliation, and by their quiet and resigned acceptance of their common fate.

It was perhaps worth while to go through one act of Milton's drama in this detail to give some idea of the skill which he has shown in working up a few verses of Genesis into an elaborate story. But no detail, no fragmentary notes of any kind, even when they deal with matters in which Milton was far stronger than he was on the side of narrative or drama, can do much to exhibit the greatness of *Paradise Lost*. For that there is only one way, to read it. And, as we said just now, to read the whole. It is true that you cannot read it for the interest of the story as you can all the *Odyssey*, much of the *Iliad* and some of the *Æneid*: but the poem is still a whole and you need the whole to judge and understand it. And even the weaker books, the fifth, the seventh and twelfth, contain episodes, like the scene between Abdiel and Satan and the incomparable conclusion of the whole poem, which are among the last a wise reader would wish to miss. Moreover, where the story is dullest it has things which give, perhaps, the most astonishing proof of Milton's power of style. It is true that he does himself occasionally fall into the empty pomposity which characterized his eighteenth-century imitators who fancied that big words could turn prose into poetry. So he talks of dried fruits as "what by frugal

storing firmness gains To nourish, and superfluous moist consumes." But the thing most remarkable about this is its extreme rarity. Taking the poem as a whole, the mighty music scarcely ceases : the majestic flight of the poet continues uninterrupted : no contrary winds disturb it, no weariness brings it flagging down to earth. There is nothing, not even theological disputes, out of which he cannot make fine verse, and occasionally great poetry. There is nothing, however great, that he cannot make his own. Just as Shakspeare took the noble prose of North's *Plutarch*, and hardly altering a word made noble poetry of it, so Milton can take the Bible. "For now," says Job, "I should have lain still and been quiet, I should have slept : then had I been at rest." North could not rise to the height of this. But even this Milton will dare to lay his hand upon : and, if even he cannot lift it any higher, only he could have touched it at all without desecration. "How glad," says Adam—

"how glad would lay me down
As in my mother's lap ! There I should rest,
And sleep secure."

Or take a passage like that of the Son of God clothing Adam and Eve after the Fall, where

many Biblical suggestions are gathered together—

“As when he washed his servants’ feet, so
now
As father of his family he clad
Their nakedness with skins of beasts, or
slain,
Or, as the snake, with youthful coat repaid;
And thought not much to clothe his
enemies.”

The full appreciation of a passage like this, so very simple, so apparently obvious, yet so entirely in the grand style which, whether his subject stoops or soars, very rarely fails Milton, is not a thing of one reading or of two. Milton, the greatest artist of our language, is naturally the most conspicuous instance of the law which applies to all great art. Only natures as rarely endowed with the receptive gift as he was himself with the creative can fully appreciate his work at the first reading. Like all great works of the imagination it has generally to train, sometimes almost to create, the faculties which are to appreciate it aright. This is particularly true in the case of classical art, where the emotional appeal, though just as real, is much less apparent because it is so much more controlled by intellectual sanity. Gothic

and Romantic art are commonly far more instantaneous in the impression they make, perhaps because, according to the ingenious suggestion of the Poet Laureate, they admit at once of more daring flights of the imagination and of stronger realism than classical art can bear. But it may well be doubted whether the wonder and delight which every man of the most modest æsthetic capacity owes to them can in the end keep pace with the slower growing appreciation of the universality and sanity of classical work. But this is an old dispute not likely to be settled this year or next. Nor does it affect the fact that all great work, even Romantic or Gothic, gains by time in proportion to its greatness. It is the only absolutely certain test of greatness in art. The instantly popular tune is unendurable in six months, the instantly popular novel or poem is totally forgotten in a year or two. No one perceives the whole greatness of St. Paul's Cathedral, or Sansovino's Library at Venice, or the music of Bach, or the poetry of Milton, at the first sight or hearing. No competent eye, ear or mind fails to perceive more and more of it at each renewed experience. Whatever be the art, a picture, a piece of sculpture, a book, the test is the same : the cheap, the sentimental,

the sensational, the merely pretty, lose something, be it little or much, at each renewal of acquaintance : the great work steadily gains. To this test *Paradise Lost* can fearlessly appeal. It is not meant for idle hours or empty people. It is not amusing in the lower sense of the word. It is not as exciting as it might well have been. It is probably true that, as Johnson said with his usual honesty, "No one ever wished it longer than it is" : yet there is equal truth in another remark of his, "I cannot wish Milton's work other than it is," and in the implied answer to his bold question, "What other author ever soared so high or sustained his flight so long?" The difficulty for Milton's readers is that they do not easily soar, and still less easily sustain their soaring. The great gifts which Johnson brought to the criticism of literature lay far more in common sense and in a profound insight into human life than in any real turn for poetry. Of that nearly every one who to-day gives much time to reading poetry will probably have as much as he. Such people are sometimes mistakenly content with a single reading of *Paradise Lost*. They remember a few of its glories and the rest of the poem they acquiesce in forgetting. Let them put it to the test to which lovers of music

put the Symphonies of Beethoven and lovers of sculpture the remains of the Parthenon and the temple of the Ephesian Artemis. Let them give the little time required to read it through every year, or every second year. They will find more in it the second time than they did the first, and much more the fifth or the tenth time. It will issue triumphantly from the trial : and before they reach middle age they will know by their own personal experience, what the best authorities have always told them, that this is one of those rare works of human genius whose power and beauty may in sober truth be called inexhaustible.

CHAPTER V

PARADISE REGAINED AND SAMSON AGONISTES

PARADISE REGAINED, like the *Odyssey*, the *Æneid* and the second part of *Faust*, has been an inevitable victim of the human taste for comparison. It cannot fail to be compared with *Paradise Lost* and cannot fail to suffer by it. The poets and critics have indeed been kinder to it than the public. Johnson said that if it had not been written by Milton "it would receive universal praise." Wordsworth thought it "the most perfect in execution of anything written by Milton." But the great body of readers finds an epic with only two main actors in it, and hardly anything that can be called a story, too severe a demand upon its poetic taste. And when unprofessional opinion remains constant for several generations, as it has in this case, it is never wise to ignore or defy it. *Paradise Regained* is a very bare poem. It has none of the splendours of its predecessor: no

scenes in which we hear the full voice of that Milton

“ Whose Titan angels, Gabriel, Abdiel,
Starr'd from Jchovah's gorgeous armouries,
Tower, as the deep-domed empyrean
Rings to the roar of an angel onset; ”

nor yet any of those others which delighted Tennyson even more, the scenes of Adam's

“ bowery loneliness,
The brooks of Eden mazily murmuring,
And bloom profuse and cedar arches.”

It has no love, no sin, no quarrel, no reconciliation, no central moment of tragic suspense, indeed no human action at all. And Milton has refrained almost absolutely from adorning it with the similes which are among the chief glories of *Paradise Lost*. It is, in fact, as Mark Pattison has said, “ probably the most unadorned poem extant in any language.”

At the very beginning of *Paradise Lost* Milton had cast his eye on to that second chapter in the Christian history of man without which the first is a mere picture of despair. His subject was to be man's first disobedience and its results; death, woe and loss of Eden

“ till one greater Man
Restore us and regain the blissful seat.”

Whether he then had any thought of attempting to deal with that restoration we do not know. Nor do we know what motives induced him to choose the story of the Temptation in the Wilderness as the action in which the new order of things was to be manifested. Some critics have been surprised that he did not take the Crucifixion or the Resurrection. And it is obvious that the first, with the Tree of Calvary pointing back to the Tree in the Garden, would have afforded a natural sequence to *Paradise Lost*. Others have wondered that he did not use the Descent into Hell in which the liberation of Satan's captives would have followed on the story of how they fell into his power. And it is obvious that there were great poetic, and especially Miltonic, possibilities in the theme of the victorious Son of God entering the very kingdom in which the Satan of *Paradise Lost* had exercised such splendid rule, and setting free the saints and prophets and kings of the Old Testament. But it is possible, as Sir Walter Raleigh has suggested, that Milton was no longer in the vein for grandiose themes of external majesty and might such as this story would have afforded. "His interest was now centred rather in the sayings of the wise than in the deeds of the mighty." That

may be so : though his *Samson* which was yet to come is certainly not without its mighty deeds. But, whatever were his reasons for putting aside such subjects as the Descent into Hell, it is not difficult to discover several which he probably found decisive in inducing him to prefer the Temptation to the Passion. To begin with, he must have been conscious of the immensely greater difficulty of handling the story of the Passion in such a way that Christian readers could bear to read it. Then, even more certainly operative on his mind was the fact that the Passion is related to us in great detail, the Temptation in a few words of mysterious import; so that the one leaves almost no freedom of invention to the poet, while the other scarcely binds him at all. Then again there is the close parallelism between the temptation in the Garden and the temptation in the Wilderness; and finally, most important of all, the fact that the Temptation is the only event in the life of Christ in which Satan plays a visible and important part. A poem that was to be a second part of *Paradise Lost* could not do without Satan; and in fact he is even more prominent in *Paradise Regained*, where he is present throughout, than in its predecessor of which there are several books which scarcely so

much as mention him. This was no doubt decisive.

So Milton chose the Temptation in the Wilderness as his subject, with Satan once more as one of the two principal actors in his story. But the actor is even more changed than the story. The Satan of the later poem is no longer the splendid rebel of *Paradise Lost*. *Paradise Regained* has in it no heavenly battles and its council of devils is a mere shadow of the great parliament of hell. It has, therefore, no place either for the general of the infernal armies or for the Prime Minister of the infernal Senate. The magnificent figure who imposes himself on the imagination—

“Like Teneriffe or Atlas unremoved”—

becomes in it something far less impressive, a political theorist instead of a statesman, a student of the balance of power instead of a soldier, a casuistical disputant about culture and morals in place of a devil venturing all for empire and revenge. It is as if Alexander were exchanged for Aristotle: almost as if St. George were replaced by Mr. Worldly Wiseman. The imagination is affected by the inevitable loss of colour, and *Paradise Regained* is the sufferer in fame and popularity.

It also suffers from the old difficulty in-

herent in supernatural personages which affects it even more than *Paradise Lost*. The whole action is a succession of Temptations. The question how far such attempts by a devil upon a Divine Being can afford any hope to the one or any fear or danger to the other is a mystery of which the Church itself scarcely claims to offer a full explanation. Into the theological difficulty this is not the place to enter. It is only with the corresponding poetic difficulty which we are concerned. Just as in *Paradise Lost* it is impossible not to feel the unreality of the war in heaven, so in *Paradise Regained* it is impossible not to feel, in spite of some inconsistency of language on the subject, that Satan commonly knows who it is whom he is assailing and is known by Him in return, and that consequently the whole action has for poetic purposes a certain unreality. He knows that Jesus is the Son of God; with a right to the homage of all nature and the power to take all as His own. He asks—

“Hast thou not right to all created things?
Owe not all creatures, by just right, to thee
service?”

Yet he discusses with Him various very human methods of arriving at power, just as

if He were subject to the same conditions as other men who desire to rule or influence the world. The consequence is that, although the speeches contain much interesting thought and much fine poetry, they are seldom or never dramatically convincing. Our Lord, in particular, instead of the gracious and winning figure of the Gospels, becomes a kind of self-sufficient aristocratic moralist. His speeches, as Milton gives them, display rather the defiant virtue of the Stoic, or the self-conscious righteousness of the Pharisee, than the simple and loving charity of the Christian. The weapon of moral and intellectual contempt, so freely employed in them and so natural both to Jew and to Greek, strikes to us a false and jarring note when put into the mouth of Him who taught His disciples that the only way of entry into His kingdom was that of being born again and becoming as little children.

These are all serious drawbacks and they are not the only ones. If from one point of view Milton in *Paradise Regained* is too little of a Christian, from another he is too much. One of the gravest difficulties with which Christian apologists have always had to contend is the entire indifference of the New Testament and, generally speaking, of the

Church in all ages, especially the most devout, not only to economic and material progress, but to all elements except the ethical and spiritual in the higher civilization of humanity. At its friendliest the Church has hardly ever been willing to allow to such things any inherent or independent importance of their own. Those who feel that they owe an incalculable debt to art and poetry and philosophy and therefore to the Greeks, have inevitably found this attitude a stumbling-block. And they will always read with exceptional surprise and indignation the narrow obscurantism of the speech which Milton, scholar and artist as he was, is not ashamed to put into the mouth of Christ in the fourth book. He cannot himself have been a victim of the shallow fallacy expressed in line 325 (he who reads gets little benefit unless he brings judgment to his reading "and what he brings what need he elsewhere seek?"); and his lifelong practice shows that he did not think Greek poetry was "Thin-sown with aught of profit or delight."

Nor could he have seriously thought that the Hebrew prophets taught "the solid rules of civil government," of which in fact they knew nothing except on the moral side, better than the statesmen and philosophers of Rome and

Athens. The explanation is, perhaps, partly that Milton was an Arian, and therefore felt at liberty to emphasize the Jewish limitations of Christ: limitations the possibility of which, as recent controversies have shown, even Athanasian opinion has been forced to face. But, in any case, in the *Paradise Regained* stress is necessarily, for dramatic purposes, laid on the Hebrew and Messianic character of Christ, and from that point of view it is not unnatural to make Him the spokesman of Hebrew resistance to the intellectual encroachments of Greece and Rome. Another part of the explanation is that the strong Biblical and Hebraic element in Milton's character does seem to have increased in strength during his later years. It was far from getting exclusive possession even then, and all the evidence shows that he was always the very opposite of the narrow-minded Puritan fanatics of his day. But his tendencies in that direction would be exaggerated while he was occupied with a purely Biblical subject. And he may have thought, if he thought about the question at all, that the contemptuous tone adopted about classical culture in the speech of Christ was not only dramatically defensible, but balanced by the far finer passage, evidently written from his

heart, in which Satan exalts the glories of Athens. It is, perhaps, the most famous thing in the poem.

“ Look once more, ere we leave this specular
mount,
Westward, much nearer by south-west;
behold
Where on the Ægean shore a city stands,
Built nobly, pure the air and light the soil—
Athens, the eye of Greece, mother of arts
And eloquence, native to famous wits
Or hospitable, in her sweet recess,
City or suburban, studious walks and shades.
See there the olive-grove of Academe,
Plato’s retirement, where the Attic bird
Trills her thick-warbled notes the summer
long;
There flow’ry hill Hymettus, with the sound
Of bees’ industrious murmur, oft invites
To studious musing; there Ilissus rolls
His whispering stream. Within the walls
then view
The schools of ancient sages, his who bred
Great Alexander to subdue the world,
Lyceum there; and painted Stoa next.
There thou shalt hear and learn the secret
power
Of harmony, in tones and numbers hit
By voice or hand, and various-measured
verse,
Æolian charms and Dorian lyric odes,
And his who gave them breath, but higher
sung,

Blind Melesigenes, thence Homer called,
Whose poem Phœbus challenged for his own.
Thence what the lofty grave Tragedians
taught
In chorus or iambic, teachers best
Of moral prudence, with delight received
In brief sententious precepts, while they
treat
Of fate, and chance, and change in human
life,
High actions and high passions best de-
scribing.”

It is plainly the very voice of the poet himself, and he may have felt certain that we should so understand it. But it is difficult not to regret that it is the Devil who is made to pay Milton's great debt to Athens and Christ who is made to repudiate it.

Yet, in spite of all this, in spite of its disdain of the obvious attractions open to poetry, in spite of much in it that alienates the sympathies of many, the *Paradise Regained* has received very high praise from the finest judges of English poetry. Johnson and Wordsworth have already been quoted, and to them may be added Coleridge, who says of it that “in its kind it is the most perfect poem extant,” and Mr. Mackail, who has spoken of its “unique poetic qualities.” Why have the poets and critics been so much

more favourable to it than the public? Perhaps because artists are always inclined to value work in proportion to its difficulties. Indeed, this fallacy seems natural to all classes of men about their own work. Gardeners in England tend to admire a man who grows indifferent oranges more than a man who grows good strawberries. It is like what Johnson said of the preaching lady: "Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all." This tendency to let surprise sit in the seat which belongs to judgment is greatly intensified by professional knowledge. The architect is apt to exaggerate the merit of a building placed on a very awkward site, the artist to think a piece of very difficult foreshortening more beautiful than it really is. The public may not be so good a judge either of the building or of the drawing: but, knowing nothing of the technical difficulties, it at least forms its judgment on the true criterion which is, of course, the value of the product, not the surprisingness of its having been produced or the difficulties overcome in its production.

Something of this kind may account for the fact that *Paradise Regained* has been more appreciated by the poets than by the public.

The public finds it rather bare and dry and judges accordingly. The poets know how infinitely hard a task it was that Milton set himself, and find no praise too great for the man who did not fail in it. They see a poem of two thousand lines whose single subject is the attempt of a devil who knows himself doomed to defeat to persuade a divine Person who knows Himself assured of victory to be false to the law of His being. And into this barren theme they see art and nature, ethics and politics, luxury and splendour and empire, cunningly interwoven and

“Eden raised in the waste Wilderness.”

They see a style stripped of almost all ornament especially in the speeches of our Lord : the poet deliberately walking always on the very edge of the gulf of prose and yet always as one perfectly assured that into that gulf his feet can never fall. Here and there, as when we come upon such lines as

“I never liked thy talk, thy offers less,”

we are nervous as we watch : but the poet passes on his way serenely unconscious of our fears, and in the very next speech is on the heights of poetry with the great description

of Athens. Once only, perhaps, in the reply to Satan after the storm—

“ Me worse than wet thou find’st not,”

we feel that the cunningly maintained balance has failed and that the limit has been passed which divides the severe from the grotesque.

The truth is that, if the narrowness of its subject and the austerity of its style be admitted, *Paradise Regained* is a poetic achievement as great as it is surprising. It cannot be *Paradise Lost*, of course, and that is the fault for which it has not been forgiven. And its fine things are even less evident, much less evident, at a first reading than those of *Paradise Lost*. But Milton has left nothing more Miltonic. He did greater things but nothing in which he stands so entirely alone. There is no poem in English, perhaps none in any language of the world, which exhibits to the same degree the inherent power of style itself, in its naked essence, unassisted by any of its visible accessories. There are in it, of course, some passages of characteristic splendour, the banquet in the wilderness, the vision of Rome, and others; but a large part of the poem is as bare as the mountains and, to the luxurious and conventional, as bleak and forbidding. Its grave Dorian music, scarcely

heard by the sensual ear, is played by the mind to the spirit and by the spirit to the mind. Ever present as its art is, it is an art infinitely removed from that to which all the world at once responds and surrenders. It is not at first seen to be art at all. The verse which in truth dances so cunningly appears to the uninitiated to stumble and halt. The music, which the common ear is so slow to catch, makes us think of those Platonic mysteries of abstract number seen only in their perfection by some godlike mathematician who lives rapt above sense and matter in the contemplation of the Idea of Good.

But, if there is much in an art so consummate as Milton's which escapes analysis, there are also elements which can be measured and weighed. Here as in the *Paradise Lost* students of metre can count and compare his stresses and pauses, and set out some finite portion of the infinite variety of rhythms which, even more needed here than in *Paradise Lost*, sustain the poem in its difficult flight over so apparently barren a country. The art of the poet as distinct from the musician is less difficult to trace. An avowed sequel has to recall its predecessor and yet not to recall it too much. *Paradise Regained* recalls *Paradise Lost* by its central action, a tempta-

tion, by its council of devils, by its assembly of the heavenly host, by a hundred echoes of phrase and circumstance. But though the heavenly host is itself unchanged, though it is still the old "full frequency bright Of Angels" yet there is now no real council. The Son, the only spokesman who can address the Father, is no longer present, and even the hymn of the angels gets no more than a vague description. A greater change has come over the infernal council: scarcely any longer infernal, for their leader can now open his address to them with

"O ancient Powers of Air and this wide
World,"

and the meeting is held in mid air and no longer in hell. Nor is any rivalry attempted with the great debate of *Paradise Lost*: only enough to awaken its memory in the reader and to enable the poet to find a place in the second meeting for the most obvious of temptations which yet reverence forbade him to introduce into the main action. And note how this contains at least one of those small dramatic touches for which, except from Mr. Mackail, Milton has got too little credit. Satan asks how he is to assail the new enemy: and Belial, who stands for the sensualist man of the world, at once offers his suggestion.

He is sure, as such men always are, that the lowest motive is invariably the true mainspring and explanation of all human actions : there is no beating about the bush with him : he is frank and cynical, and begins at once without shame, apology or preface—

“ Set women in his eye and in his walk.”

What could be more exactly in the downright manner affected by men of his type in the world of to-day and every day? And there are other similar touches. Then again the sequel recalls its predecessor when we hear Satan strike the very note he struck so often in *Paradise Lost*—

“ ’Tis true, I am that Spirit unfortunate,”
and when we see him fall in ruin at the awful end of the long debate—

“ Now shew thy progeny ; if not to stand
Cast thyself down ; safely, if Son of God ;
For it is written : ‘ He will give command
Concerning thee to his Angels : in their
hands
They shall uplift thee, lest at any time
Thou chance to dash thy foot against a
stone.’
To whom thus Jesus : Also it is written
‘ Tempt not the Lord thy God.’ He said,
and stood :
But Satan, smitten with amazement, fell.”

Nor must it be supposed by those who have not read the *Paradise Regained* that the bareness of its style is invariable. Most conspicuous, for reasons of reverence no doubt, in the speeches of Christ, it is far less marked in those of Satan and disappears altogether in some of the descriptive passages. Take, for instance, the famous temptation of the banquet—

“ He spake no dream ; for, as his words had end,
Our Saviour, lifting up his eyes, beheld
In ample space under the broadest shade,
A table richly spread in regal mode,
With dishes piled, and meats of noblest sort
And savour ; beasts of chase, or fowl of game,
In pastry built, or from the spit, or boiled,
Grisamber-steamed ; all fish from sea or
shore
Freshet or purling brook, of shell or fin,
And exquisitest name, for which was drained
Pontus, and Lucrine bay, and Afric coast.
Alas, how simple, to these cates compared,
Was that crude apple that diverted Eve !
And at a stately sideboard, by the wine,
That fragrant smell diffused, in order stood
Tall stripling youths rich-clad, of fairer hue
Than Ganymed or Hylas ; distant more,
Under the trees now tripped, now solemn
stood,
Nymphs of Diana’s train, and Naiades
With fruits and flowers from Amalthea’s
horn,

And ladies of the Hesperides, that seemed
Fairer than feigned of old, or fabled since
Of faery damsels met in forest wide
By knights of Logres, or of Lyones,
Lancelot, or Pelleas, or Pellenore.”

Paradise Lost itself contains no more intricately beautiful passage than this. It is one of those things that have been the delight and despair of poets ever since. For all his disdain of the follies of the Middle Age Milton can never touch the old romances, as Joseph Warton well noted, without immediately rising into the most exquisite poetry: and this reluctant homage of classical genius is the greatest tribute ever paid to their undying fascination.

But of course such a passage as this is not typical of the poem: it is one of its far-shining heights which cannot be altogether missed even by eyes quite blind to the beauties of the lower country through which *Paradise Regained* takes the most part of its course. Ordinarily the poem is grave, plain and unadorned, engaged in the discussion of moral problems which give little opportunity for the more obvious graces of poetry. The interest of the speeches which constitute the bulk of it is threefold: technical, in the rhythmical or metrical skill by which Milton sustains an

abstract discourse expressed in unadorned language and keeps it at the level of high poetry; moral or intellectual, the interest of the subjects discussed; and, the greatest of all for many readers, autobiographical, the interest of the evidence they afford of the poet's own thoughts and character. All may be seen, for instance, in such a confession as that of Satan in the first book—

“ Envy, they say, excites me, thus to gain
Companions of my misery and woe !
At first it may be ; but, long since with woe
Nearer acquainted, now I feel by proof
That fellowship in pain divides not smart,
Nor lightens aught each man's peculiar load.”

There is scarcely a word in it that prose cannot use even to-day. The thought is one that might come from any moralist ; there is nothing daring or imaginative about it. Yet out of this what poetry Milton has made ! The personal emotion of it, the note of confession and individual experience, has lifted it altogether above the level of the cold maxims of the preacher who gives no sign of having suffered, or sinned, or so much as lived, himself. Then the art of it : so entirely unperceived by the ordinary reader, so invincible in its effect upon him. The whole secret of it defies analysis : but a few ingredients can

be detected. There is comparatively little of Milton's favourite alliteration: the tone of the passage is too quiet for the free use of an artistic device so instantly visible. But note the beautiful line—

“Companions of my misery and woe”—

itself free flowing without a pause of any kind, so as to prepare the better for the full pause both of sense and of rhythm which separates it from what follows. Then there is the vivid conversational “At first it may be,” and its pause, contrasting so finely with the next line where the pause is also after the fifth syllable, but with a totally different effect. Note again the variety of rhythm which distinguishes the last two lines. Neither has any strong pause in it: and they might so easily have been a monotonous repetition. Is it fanciful to think that, perhaps half unconsciously, Milton has suggested the quick stab of pain or sorrow in the swift movement of the first: and that the long-drawn rhythm of the second is meant to convey something of the dull years of misery which so often follow? Its first six syllables—

“Nor lightens aught each man's,”

if given their full effect of sound, take perhaps half as long again to read as the first six of the

preceding line. In any case, whatever was meant by it, the line is a most beautiful one in itself, as well as full of one of the most moving of human things, a strong man's confession that his strength does not always suffice him.

These obviously autobiographical passages are to be found all through the poem. There are the stately Roman embassies coming and going in all their pomp : in which it is surely Cromwell's Foreign Secretary who sees nothing but

“ tedious waste of time, to sit and hear
So many hollow compliments and lies,
Outlandish flatteries.”

There is the old contempt of war and those who in virtue of their victories

“ swell with pride, and must be titled Gods,”
and of the mob who praise and admire

“ they know not what,
And know not whom, but as one leads the
other ;

And what delight to be by such extolled,
To live upon their tongues and be their talk ?
Of whom to be dispraised were no small praise,
His lot who dares be singularly good.”

There is the contempt of wealth—

“ Extol not riches then, the toil of fools,
The wise man's cumbrance, if not snare ;”

a contempt which Milton shares with nearly all saints and heroes and most philosophers ; a little ungratefully, perhaps, as if forgetting that, compared with the mass of men, he had himself always been rich, and that what he owed to the toil of his father had not proved in his case a snare or a cumbrance, but the necessary condition of the learning and the leisure he had used so nobly. Finally, to give no more instances, there is the confession at once so personal and so representative of the feeling of all men who have ever made the smallest effort to live well—

“ Hard are the ways of truth, and rough to
walk,
Smooth on the tongue discoursed, pleasing
to the ear,
And tunable as sylvan pipe or song.”

Who knows whether behind such words as these there lies the memory of some rapturous vision of the new world of love as St. Paul saw it, which had been cooled only too soon by humbling experience of the difficulty of “ bearing all things ” when all things included Salmasius, or an unthankful daughter ?

This grave introspective note, present from the first in everything written by Milton and far more conspicuous in *Paradise Regained* than in *Paradise Lost*, is felt still more in the

last of his works, the drama *Samson Agonistes*. It is in the Greek form with a Chorus : and is as broodingly full as Æschylus or Sophocles of the folly of man and the uncertainty and sadness of human life ; but Milton has added an angry sternness of judgment on the one hand, and on the other an assured faith in divine deliverance, both of which are rather Hebrew than Greek. Into this strange drama, so alien from all the literature of his day, Milton has poured all the thoughts and emotions with which the spectacle of his own life filled him. All through it we hear a faith that was strong but never blind battling with the spectacle of the wickedness of men and the dark uncertainty of the ways of God. The Philistines have triumphed, lords sit “lordly in their wine” at Whitehall, the Dagon of prelatism is once more enthroned throughout the land, the saints are dispersed and forsaken, and he himself, who had as he thought so signally borne his witness for God, sits blind and sad in his lonely house, “to visitants a gaze Or pitied object,” with no hope left of high service to his country and no prospect but that of a “contemptible old age obscure.” No doubt he did not always feel like that, for the evidence shows him cheerful and friendly in company : and, of

course, the picture has undergone the imaginative heightening of art besides being coloured by the story of Samson, so much sadder than Milton's own. But the lonely hours of a blind man of genius who has fought for a great cause and been utterly defeated must often be full of the hopeless half-resigned and half-rebellious broodings in which throughout *Samson* we hear so plainly the voice of Milton himself.

“ God of our fathers ! what is Man,
That thou towards him with hand so various—
Or might I say contrarious ?—
Temper'st thy providence through his short
course ;
Not evenly, as thou rulest
The angelic orders and inferior creatures mute,
Irrational and brute ?
Nor do I name of men the common rout,
That wandering loose about
Grow up and perish as the summer fly,
Heads without name, no more remembered ;
But such as thou hast solemnly elected,
With gifts and graces eminently adorned,
To some great work, thy glory,
And people's safety, which in part they effect :
Yet toward these thus dignified thou oft,
Amidst their highth of noon,
Changest thy countenance and thy hand, with
no regard
Of highest favours past
From thee on them, or them to thee of service.”

This is Milton undisguised speaking of and for himself. And so is the still sadder outburst in the very first speech of Samson—

“ O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
Without all hope of day !

O first-created beam, and thou great Word,
‘ Lct there be light, and light was over
all ’ ;

Why am I thus bereaved thy prime decree ?

The Sun to me is dark

And silent as the Moon

When she deserts the night,

Hid in her vacant interlunar cave.

Since light so necessary is to life,

And almost life itself, if it be true

That light is in the soul,

She all in every part, why was the sight

To such a tender ball as the eye confined,

So obvious and so easy to be quenched,

And not, as feeling, through all parts
diffused,

That she might look at will through every
pore ?

Then had I not been thus exiled from light,

As in the land of darkness, yet in light,

To live a life half dead, a living death,

And buried ; but, O yet more miserable !

Myself my sepulchre, a moving grave ;

Buried, yet not exempt,

By privilege of death and burial,

From worst of other evils, pains, and wrongs,

But made hereby obnoxious more

To all the miseries of life,
Life in captivity
Among inhuman foes.”

This sublime music in which the soul's emotion finds and obeys its own law was scarcely audible to the age which followed Milton's death, when poets had concentrated all their art on the effort to make both language and metre as instantaneously intelligible as possible. They succeeded much better in the second task than in the first: for the truth is that the exact meaning of a verse is much more often difficult to ascertain in the case of Pope than in the case of Milton. But no one has ever doubted how to read aloud a line of Pope or Dryden. And this has obvious advantages and was, of course, at first a great source of pleasure. It made Pope's poetry the most immediately popular we have ever had, as it still is the most effective for public quotation. Almost everybody, as Mr. Bridges has said, “has a natural liking for the common fundamental rhythms” and “it is only after long familiarity with them that the ear grows dissatisfied and wishes them to be broken.” But in poetry as in music the more cultivated the ear the sooner it gets tired of being given too little to do: and as soon as every warbler had Pope's

tune by heart critical readers began to wish for something less obvious. The ultimate result of that dissatisfaction was the metrical experiments of Coleridge and the rich harvest of varied rhythms and melody with which Shelley and Tennyson and Swinburne enriched the nineteenth century. And all this movement had also, of course, a retrospective effect. It may be true that, as Mr. Bridges says, "there are very few persons indeed who take such a natural delight in rhythm for its own sake that they can follow with pleasure a learned rhythm which is very rich in variety, and the beauty of which is its perpetual freedom to obey the sense and diction;" but it could not fail to be the case that their number was increased by the comparative sensitiveness to the more intricate music of words which was inevitably produced in those who had learnt much Shelley or Tennyson by heart. And such people at once heard things in Milton which were absolutely inaudible to the ears of Dr. Johnson's generation. The comparative subtlety, both in imagination and in form, of the poetry of the nineteenth century made it impossible for poets to compete with journalists for the attention of the big public as Pope had done triumphantly; but as a set off against that loss it gave a far

richer delight to those who were capable of that interaction of the natural ear and the spiritual to which all great poetry makes its appeal. This led straight back to Milton who made that double appeal as only a very few poets in all the world have ever made it. And the more poetry is studied and loved as the greatest of the arts, as the medium through which that combination of the vision of genius with the slow trained cunning of the craftsman, which is what great art is, finds its most perfect expression, the more will men, or at least Englishmen, return to Milton. And especially, in some ways, to *Samson*, where his art is at its boldest and freest, and where it suffered longest from the indifference of dull ears.

A little book of this kind is not the place for a discussion of English metre, or even, in any detail, of Milton's. Those who wish to go into such studies will find much of what they want in the Poet Laureate's book on *Milton's Prosody*. It is possible to disagree with some of his proposed scansion of doubtful lines, but it is impossible not to learn a great deal from suggestions as to the rhythmical effects intended by Milton which come, as these do, from one who is himself a master of rhythm and has never concealed the fact

that Milton's was one of the schools in which he passed his apprenticeship. So his analysis, line by line, of the opening of the first chorus of *Samson* will be a revelation to many of what they have, perhaps, never felt at all, or felt only unconsciously without understanding anything of what it was which they felt or why. But even without such help no one whose ear has had the smallest training can fail to notice some of the more daring of Milton's metrical effects. In the lines quoted above, for instance, who can miss the triple stab of passionate agony in the thrice repeated, strongly accented "dark, dark, dark"? The most careless reader cannot fail to be arrested by the line, though he may not realize the means employed by Milton to enforce attention, the rare six stresses in a ten-syllabled line, the still rarer effect of three strongly stressed syllables following immediately upon one another, the inversion of three out of the five stresses of the next line, "irrecoverably dark" suggesting the spasmodic disorder of violent grief. These are certainly devices deliberately chosen for producing the required effects. And so, probably, are the more regular rhythm of the words which express the calming aspiration up to the throne of God, and the quiet mono-

syllabic simplicity of the divine utterance, "Let there be light," which continues its softening influence over the return in the following lines to his own sad conditions. How smoothly the complaint now goes: "The sun to me is dark And silent as the moon." It is in comparison with the earlier abruptness as if he had gone through something like the process of the psalmist, "until I went into the sanctuary of God: then understood I" what had before been "too painful for me." Then there is the comparatively unmarked rhythm of the intellectual argumentative passage which follows: till emotion begins again to overwhelm reflection, and shows itself in the strong alliteration of "light," "land," "light," "live," "life," "living," and in the strong cæsure after "buried," the more marked for coming so early in the verse.

Such poor noting of technicities as this gives, of course, no more of the secret of Milton's wonderful poetry than anatomy gives of the power and beauty of the human body. But it has its interest and even its use: provided that too much importance is not attributed to it and that no one makes the mistake of the lady who, according to the story, hopefully asked the painter what he mixed

his paints with, and received the crushing reply, "With my brains, Madam."

Samson Agonistes stands in marked contrast to its predecessor, *Paradise Regained*. And not only in being a drama. Its intense omnipresent emotion makes a still more important difference. In passing from one to the other we pass from the least to the most emotional of Milton's works. This would in any case have been a gain for most readers: but the gain is made more important by the extreme severity of Milton's final poetic manner. A style which excludes almost all ornament stands in especial need of the support of a visibly felt emotion. It has been said by a living writer that "when reason is subsidiary to emotion verse is the right means of expression, and, when emotion to reason, prose." This is roughly true, though the poetry of mere emotion is poor stuff. The special faculty of the poet, as Johnson well said, is that of joining music with reason. That is to say that the poet unites thought and feeling and gives them perfect expression. They are not distinct: they become in his hands a new single life, a unity. You cannot separate the emotion from the thought in any great line of poetry. When Wordsworth talks of the "unimaginable touch of time," there is

plainly emotion as well as thought and memory in his words : when Shelley cries in his despair—

“ Fresh spring, and summer, and winter hoar,
Move my faint heart with grief, but with
delight

No more—O never more ! ”

it is no mere cry of the heart : the mind is in it too : and neither in him nor in Wordsworth can you get the two apart again after the poet has joined them together.

Now, though in *Paradise Regained* the intellect is not allowed, as in much eighteenth-century poetry, to become so dominant as to make us feel that prose and not verse was the proper medium for what the poet had to say, yet it does play a greater part than it can commonly play with safety, perhaps a greater part than it plays in any other English poem of the first rank. It is only Milton's unfailing gift of poetic style which saves the situation. He could do what Wordsworth could not : conduct long discussions on abstract questions without descending from the note of poetry to that of the lecture-room. The gallant explorer who fights his way through the *Prelude* and the *Excursion* wins, as he deserves, a great reward, and a greater still if he does it a second time and a third,

when he has learnt that they both have marshy valleys into which he need not twice descend. But he has paid a price for the lesson, paid it in the endurance of a great deal of solid and heavy prose. That is partly because Wordsworth often thinks without feeling or imagining : he gives us his thought as it is in itself, as a professor of moral philosophy gives it, without passing it through the transforming processes of the emotions and the imagination. These hardly fail Milton half a dozen times in all his poetry : and the result is the difference between such lines as—

“ This is the genuine course, the aim, and end
Of prescient reason ; all conclusions else
Are abject, vain, presumptuous, and perverse : ”

and such as Milton writes when he is nearest to bare thinking—

“ Who therefore seeks in these
True wisdom, finds her not, or by delusion
Far worse, her false resemblance only meets,
An empty cloud.”

The difference is also partly due to what, indeed, is another side of the same distinction : the fact that Wordsworth has not and Milton has a constant possession of the great or grand style. This is plain in such passages as those just quoted : it is plainer still where the poets come close to each other in

descriptive passages : as, for instance, in Wordsworth's—

“ Negro ladies in white muslin gowns,”
and Milton's—

“ Dusk faces with white silken turbans
wreathed ; ”

between which yawns an obviously impassable gulf.

Milton is sometimes harsh, crabbed, grim in expression as in thought : but these things are not at all necessarily fatal to poetry as is the cool and contented obviousness of Wordsworth's weak moments. Milton is occasionally contented in his own lofty fashion, but he is never cool, and never less so than in *Samson*. All through it he is face to face with a tremendous issue in which he himself is supremely interested : he is “ enacting hell,” to use Goethe's curious phrase, which fits Milton so much better than it fits the serenity of Homer. Twenty years before he had written, in quite another connection, “ No man knows hell like him who converses most in heaven ” : and now in his old age he embodies that tremendous truth in his last poem. All his poems are intensely emotional and personal : but none so much so as *Samson Agonistes*, where he is fixing all eyes on the

tragedy of his own life. The parallel between Samson and Milton does not extend, of course, to all the details. But even of them many correspond, such as the blindness, the disastrous marriage with "the daughter of an infidel," the old age of a broken and defeated champion of God become a gazing-stock to triumphant profanity. But more than any special circumstance it is the whole general position of Samson as a man dedicated from his birth to the service of God, and gladly accepting the dedication, yet failing in his task and apparently deserted by his God, which makes of him a type in which Milton can see himself and the Cromwellian saints who lie ground under the heels of the victorious Philistines of the Restoration. To him as to Samson the situation is one that makes questionings on the dark and doubtful ways of God unavoidable: darker to him even than to Samson: for he has no guilty memory of a supreme act of folly to explain the divine desertion.

The action of the drama is extremely simple. Samson is found enjoying a brief respite from his punishment. The day is a feast of Dagon, and the Philistine "superstition" allows no work to be done on it. Accordingly an attendant who is a mute person is leading

him to a bank where he is accustomed to take
what rest he is allowed and enjoy

“ The breath of heaven fresh blowing, pure
and sweet

With day-spring born ; ”

that sensation of delicate scents and cool
breezes which, as Milton knew only too well,
mean so much more to the blind than to those
who can see. Then his restless thoughts
begin to crowd upon him—

“ Why was my breeding ordered and pre-
scribed

As of a person separate to God,
Designed for great exploits ? ”

The whole passage belongs naturally enough
to Samson : but obviously here, as well as in
the blindness, the poet is already thinking of
himself. So again, when Samson proceeds to
speak of being

“ exposed

To daily fraud, contempt, abuse, and wrong,”

one can scarcely miss a reference to the
daughters who purloined and sold the blind
father's books. When the soliloquy draws
to an end the Chorus, men of his tribe, come
to visit Samson. Not even Milton ever made
the arrangement and sound of words do more
to enforce their meaning than he does in this
wonderful opening chorus—

“ This, this is he ; softly a while ;
 Let us not break in upon him.
 O change beyond report, thought, or belief ! ”

They chant their inevitable wonder at the contrast between what Samson was and what he is.

“ O mirror of our fickle state,
 Since man on earth, unparalleled !
 The rarer thy example stands,
 By how much from the top of wondrous
 glory,
 Strongest of mortal men,
 To lowest pitch of abject fortune thou art
 fallen. ”

No reader of Greek can fail to be reminded of more than one chorus in the *Œdipus* of Sophocles—

ὦ γενεαὶ βροτῶν
 ὥς ὑμᾶς ἴσα καὶ τὸ μηδὲν ζώσας ἐναριθμῶ—

“ Alas, ye generations of men, how utterly a thing of nought I count the life ye have to live ! For what man is there who wins more of happiness than just the seeming and after the semblance a falling away. With thy fate before mine eyes, unhappy Œdipus, I can call no earthly creature blest. ” Here and there, as in this passage, the parallel is very close. But Milton’s genius is too great and self-reliant for mere imitation. He sometimes recalls the very words of Greek poets as he

does those of the Bible : but that is not because he is artificially imitating either, but because he has assimilated the spirit of both and made them a part of himself.

✱ The Chorus express their sympathy with Samson and he replies, bitterly reproaching his own folly and that of the rulers of Judah who gave him up to their enemies. But human blindness will not ultimately defeat the ways of God : and the Chorus sing their song of faith, in which rhyme is called in to give its touch of impatient contempt at the folly of the atheist.

“ Just are the ways of God,
And justifiable to men ;
Unless there be who think not God at all.
If any be, they walk obscure ;
For of such doctrine never was there school,
But the heart of the fool,
And no man therein doctor but himself.”

So ends the first act or episode of the drama. The second is the visit of Samson's father Manoah, whose cry is—

“ Who would be now a father in my stead ? ”

He is trying to negotiate for his son's ransom : but Samson refuses, not desiring life, desiring rather to pay the full penalty of his sin. He cannot share his father's hopes that God will give him back the sight he so misused—

“ All otherwise to me my thoughts portend,
That these dark orbs no more shall treat
with light,
Nor the other light of life continue long,
But yield to double darkness nigh at hand :
So much I feel my genial spirits droop,
My hopes all flat ; Nature within me seems
In all her functions weary of herself ;
My race of glory run, and race of shame,
And I shall shortly be with them that rest.”

So Manoah leaves him, and in a noble lyric he laments over his greatest sufferings, which are not those of the body but those of the mind—

“ which no cooling herb
Or med’cinal liquor can assuage,
Nor breath of vernal air from snowy Alp.”

A choral song on the mysterious dealings of God closes this episode which is followed by the most dramatically effective in the poem, that of the visit of Dalila. The moment the blind man is told that it is “ Dalila, thy wife,” he cries—

“ My wife ! my traitress ! let her not come
near me : ”

and his reply to her offer of penitence, affection and help, begins with the daringly expressive line—

“ Out, out, hyæna ! these are thy wonted arts.”

A long and telling debate follows, in which

Dalila makes very good points, one of them recalling the scene in which Eve reproaches Adam for indulging her instead of exercising his right to command and control the weakness of her sex. To this argument Dalila receives the stern, characteristically Miltonic reply—

“All wickedness is weakness: that plea,
therefore

With God or man will gain thee no remission,”

He refuses her intercession with the Philistine lords, forbids her even to touch his hand;

“Not for thy life, lest fierce remembrance
wake

My sudden rage to tear thee joint by joint,”

and drives her to remind him defiantly that, whatever he and his Hebrews may say of her, she appeals to another tribunal of fame—

“In Ecron, Gaza, Asdod, and in Gath,
I shall be named among the famousest
Of women, sung at solemn festivals,
Living and dead recorded.”

So she goes out, and the Chorus make Miltonic meditations on the unhappiness of marriage and the divinely appointed subjection of women.

The next visitor is Harapha, the Philistine giant, who comes to taunt Samson, and is defied by him to mortal combat. This epi-

sode is perhaps the least interesting, but it advances the action by exhibiting Samson's returning sense that God is still with him and will yet do some great work through him. It fitly leads to the chorus—

“ O, how comely it is, and how reviving
To the spirits of just men long oppressed,
When God into the hands of their deliverer
Puts invincible might,
To quell the mighty of the earth, the
oppressor,
The brute and boisterous force of violent
men,
Hardy and industrious to support
Tyrannic power, but raging to pursue
The righteous and all such as honour truth!”

In the next scene an officer comes to demand Samson's presence at the feast of Dagon that he may entertain the Philistine lords with feats of strength. He at first dismisses the messenger with a contemptuous refusal : but, with a premonition of the end which recalls *Œdipus at Colonus*, he suddenly changes his mind—

“ I begin to feel
Some rousing motions in me, which dispose
To something extraordinary my thoughts.

If there be aught of presage in the mind,
This day will be remarkable in my life
By some great act, or of my days the last.”

“Go, and the Holy One
Of Israel be thy guide,”

sing the Chorus : and he leaves the scene, like *Œdipus*, to return no more, but to be more felt in his absence than in his presence. *Manoah* re-enters to utter his further hopes of ransom, in which there is a note of Sophoclean irony recalling the ignorant optimism of *Œdipus* in the *Tyrannus*; and as he and the Chorus talk they hear at first a loud shouting, apparently of triumph, and then another louder and more terrible—

Manoah.

“O what noise !
Mercy of Heaven ! what hideous noise was
that ?
Horribly loud, unlike the former shout.”

Chorus.

“Noise call you it, or universal groan,
As if the whole inhabitation perished ? ”

They dare not enter the city : and, as they speculate on what this great event can be, a Hebrew spectator of the catastrophe comes up and, after some brief exchange of question and answer exactly in the manner of the Greek tragedians, tells the whole story at length. The end has come. *Samson* is dead, but death is swallowed up in victory : what has happened is the last and most tremendous

triumph of the divinely chosen hero whose death is more fatal to his country's enemies than even his life had been. There is nothing left to do but to close the drama, as most Greek tragedies close, with a brief choral song of submission to the divine governance of the world:

“All is best, though we oft doubt
What the unsearchable dispose
Of Highest Wisdom brings about,
And ever best found in the close.
Oft He seems to hide his face,
But unexpectedly returns,
And to his faithful champion hath in place
Bore witness gloriously; whence Gaza
 mourns,
And all that band them to resist
His uncontrollable intent.
His servants He, with new acquist
Of true experience from this great event,
With peace and consolation hath dismissed,
And calm of mind, all passion spent.”

Such is Milton's drama: a thing worth dwelling on as entirely unique in any modern language. Some good judges have thought it the finest of his works. That will not be admitted if poetry is to be judged either by universality of appeal or by extent and variety of range. *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* will always have far more readers: and *Paradise Lost* embraces an immeasurably

greater span of human life. But, if not the greatest, *Samson* is probably for its own audience the most moving of Milton's works. It is not everybody who has in him the grave emotions to which it appeals: but whoever has will find them stirred by *Samson* as few other books in all the literature of the world can stir them.

It is curious to think of Milton composing such a drama in the midst of the theatrical revival of the Restoration. Did ever poet set himself in such opposition to the literary current of his day? Dryden's unbounded admiration for him is well known: but he understood the genius of *Paradise Lost* so little as to make an opera out of it, and he must have understood even less of *Samson*. The drama was then so much the most fashionable form of literature that he may have felt that in writing *The State of Innocence* and its preface he was taking the best means of directing public attention to *Paradise Lost*. But he would scarcely have tried to do the same for *Samson*. He had wished, perhaps, as Mr. Verrall has suggested, to write an epic and had failed to do so: hence his profound reverence for the man who had not failed. But he had written many dramas and here he had succeeded: he had pleased both his

contemporaries and himself. He would feel no need there to take lessons from Milton. Nor is he to be blamed. He and his fellow dramatists are justly criticized for many things, but there is nothing to complain of in their unlikeness to Milton. They wrote for the stage. He avowedly did not. They wrote in the spirit of the theatre of their day, with the object of providing themselves with a little money and "the town" with a few hours of more or less intellectual amusement. He wrote out of his own mind and soul, not for the entertainment of the idle folk of his own or any other day, but for men who in all times and countries should prove capable of knowing a great work when they saw it. Besides, his contemporary dramatists followed, quite legitimately, the theatrical traditions of England or France: he the very different dramatic system of the Greeks. His drama is what Greek tragedies were, an act of religion. It could take its place quite naturally, as they did, as part of a great national religious festival performed on a holy day. It is like them in the solemn music of its utterance: in its deep sense of the gravity of the issues on which human life hangs. It is like them also in technical points such as the use of a Chorus to give expression to the

spectator's emotions, the paucity of actors present on the stage at any moment, the curious imitation, to be seen also in *Comus*, of the Greek *stichomuthia*, in which a verbal passage of arms is conducted on the principle of giving each speaker one line for his attack or retort.

There are, indeed, some fundamental differences. They are important enough to have led so great a critic as Professor Jebb to argue that Milton's drama is too Hebrew to be Hellenic at all. His point is that Greek tragedy aims at producing an imaginative pleasure by arousing a "sense, on the one hand, of the heroic in man; on the other hand, of a superhuman controlling power"; and he asserts that this is not the method adopted by Milton in *Samson*. Samson is throughout a free man; his misfortunes are the fruit of his own folly. God is still on his side and his death is a patriotic triumph, not, like the death of Heracles, who resembles him in so many ways, merely the final proof of the all-powerful malignity of fate.

No one will venture to differ from Jebb on such a question without a sense of great temerity. But perhaps the truth is that one who had lived all his life, as Jebb had, in the closest intimacy with the Greek drama, would be apt to feel small differences from

it too much and broad resemblances too little. To the shepherd all his sheep differ from each other: the danger for him is to forget, what the ignorant stranger sees, that they are also all very much alike. So Jebb is no doubt perfectly right in the distinction he makes: but he is surely blinded by his own knowledge when he argues from it that *Samson Agonistes* "is a great poem and a noble drama; but neither as poem nor as drama is it Hellenic." Of that question comparative ignorance is perhaps a better judge. For it can still see that the broad division which separates the world's drama into two kinds is a real thing, and that Milton's drama belongs in spite of differences unquestionably to the Greek kind and not to the other, both by its method and by its spirit. There can be no real doubt that it is far more like the *Prometheus* or the *Œdipus* than it is like *Hamlet* or *All for Love*. Probably no great tragedy of any sort can be made without that sense of the contrast between man's will and the "superhuman controlling power" of which Jebb speaks as peculiarly Greek. Certainly it is present in the greatest of Shakspeare's tragedies, and not seldom finds open expression. "There's a divinity that shapes our ends."

But the point is that in *Samson*, the note of which is always the classical, never the mystical or romantic, this sense is present, not in Shakspeare's way, but substantially in the Greek way. The fact that Samson is free and that his God is his friend does not prevent his feeling just in the Greek way that God's ways are dark and inscrutable, past man's finding out, and far above out of the reach of his control. It does not prevent his being helpless as well as heroic, fully conscious that all his strength leaves him still a weak child at the absolute disposal of incomprehensible Omnipotence. So the whole atmosphere of the play, as well as its formal mould, will always recall the Greek tragedies. And rightly : the likenesses of every kind are far greater than the differences. The distinctions which led Jebb to declare it was not Hellenic at all are far less important than the kinship which made a still greater critic, the poet Goethe, declare that it had "more of the antique spirit than any production of any other modern poet."

A more obvious and perhaps more important difference than that on which Jebb lays such stress is, of course, the fundamental one that the Greek plays were written for performance and that many of them have

elaborately contrived "plots." No one supposes that *Samson* would be effective on the stage; but the modern dramatist who could make his play as exciting to the spectator as the *Ædipus Tyrannus* or *Electra* of Sophocles, or the *Hippolytus* or *Medea* of Euripides, would assuredly be no ordinary playwright. This Milton did not attempt. His drama resembles rather the earlier Greek tragedies where the lyrical element is still the principal thing while the "plot" and the persons who act its story play a comparatively subordinate part. It is, at any rate in form, more like *Æschylus* than Sophocles, and more like the *Persæ* and the *Prometheus* than the *Oresteian Trilogy*. To the *Prometheus*, indeed, it bears particularly close and obvious resemblances; for instance, both have a heroic and defiant prisoner as their principal figure, and as their minor figures a succession of friends and enemies who visit him.

However, literary parallels and precedents of this kind are perhaps rather interesting than important. Milton's greatness is his own. Only the fact remains that, as it was of an order that need not fear to measure itself with the Greeks and as he happened to put its dramatic expression into a Greek form, he has given us something which comes far

nearer to producing on us the particular impression of sublimity made by the greatest Greek dramas than anything else in English or perhaps in any modern language. In English nothing worth mentioning of the kind has been attempted, till in our own day the present Poet Laureate wrote his *Prometheus the Fire-Giver* and *Achilles in Scyros*. But, interesting and beautiful as these are, they make no pretence to rival *Samson Agonistes*. They are altogether on a smaller scale of art, of thought, of emotion.

Samson Agonistes is Milton's last word and on the whole his saddest. Yet the final effect of great art is never sad. The sense of greatness transcends all pain. In the preface of *Samson* Milton alludes to Aristotle's remark that it is the function of tragedy to effect through pity and fear a proper purgation of these emotions. Whatever be the precise meaning of that famous and disputed sentence, there is no doubt that Milton gives part of its general import truly enough when he paraphrases it "to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight stirred up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated." And its application extends far beyond the mere field of tragedy. So far as other kinds of poetry, or indeed any of the arts, deal with

subjects that arouse any of the deeper human emotions, the law of purification by a kind of delight is one by which they stand or fall. A crucifixion which is merely painful, as many primitive crucifixions are, or merely disgusting, as many later ones are, is so far a failure. It has not done the work art has to do. Shakspeare knew this well enough, though he very likely never thought about it. The final word of his great tragedies is one of sorrow overpassed and transformed. "The rest is silence;" "Dost thou not see my baby at my breast That sucks the nurse asleep?" "I have almost forgot the taste of fears;" "My heart doth joy that yet in all my life I found no man but he was true to me!" This is the note always struck before the very end comes. And Milton, so unlike Shakspeare both as man and as artist, is no less conspicuous than he in the strict observance of this practice. All his poems, without exception, end in quietness and confidence. The beauty of the last lines of *Paradise Lost*, to which early critics were so strangely blind, is now universally celebrated—

"Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped
 them soon;
The world was all before them, where to
 choose

Their place of rest, and Providence their
guide.

They, hand in hand, with wandering steps
and slow,

Through Eden took their solitary way."

The storm and stress of day are over and are followed by the passionless quiet of evening. So in *Paradise Regained*. A modern poet would have been tempted to end at line 635, with a kind of dramatic fall of the curtain—

"on thy glorious work

Now enter, and begin to save Mankind."

Not so Milton. As after the most awe-inspiring death known to literature the *Œdipus Coloneus* closes on the note of acquiescent peace—

"Come, cease lamentation, lift it up no more;
for verily these things stand fast;"

so Milton ends the long debate of his poem, not with victory, but with silence—

"He, unobserved,

Home to his mother's house private re-
turned."

It is indeed just the opposite in one way of the conclusion of *Paradise Lost*. The man and woman who had fallen before the Tempter had no home to return to: they must seek a new "place of rest" elsewhere in the new world that was before them. The Man who

had vanquished him could go back quietly to the home of his childhood. But the contrast is external, the likeness essential. For the first man as well as the second there is an appointed place of rest and a Providence to guide: the two poems can both end on the same note of that peace which follows upon the right understanding of all great experiences.

This, which is only implied in his earlier poems, is almost expressly set forth in the last of all Milton's words, the already quoted conclusion of Samson—

“ His servants He, with new acquist
Of true experience from this great event,
With peace and consolation hath dismissed,
And calm of mind, all passion spent.”

Milton was a passionate man who lived in passionate times. Neither his passions nor those of the men of his day are of very much matter to us now. But the art in which he “spent” them, in which, that is to say, he embodied, transcended and glorified them, till through it he and we alike attain to consolation and calm, is an eternal possession not only of the English race but of the whole world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

THE literature that in one way or another deals with Milton is, of course, immense. His name fills more than half of one of the volumes of the great British Museum Catalogue, more than sixteen pages being devoted to the single item of *Paradise Lost*. They afford perhaps the most striking of all proofs of the universality of his genius; for they include translations into no fewer than eighteen languages, many of which possess a large choice of versions. Into more than a very small fraction of such a vast field it is obviously impossible to enter here. Only a few notes can be given, under the four headings of Poetry, Prose, Biography and Criticism.

POETRY

Of the poetry, it may be worth saying, though MSS. hardly come within the scope of a brief bibliography of this sort, that a manuscript, mainly in the handwriting of Milton himself and containing many of his early poems, is preserved in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge. The printed copies, of course, begin with those published in his own lifetime. They contain practically the whole of his poetry. The most important are the volume containing his early poems issued in 1645, *Paradise Lost* which first appeared in 1667, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* which followed in 1671, and a re-issue in 1673, with additions, of the volume of his minor poems already printed in 1645. The first complete edition was *The Poetical Works of Mr. John Milton*, issued by Jacob Tonson in 1695.

So much for the bare text. Annotation naturally soon followed. The earliest commentator was Patrick Hume who published an edition of the poems with notes on *Paradise Lost* in 1695. But the most famous, though also least important, of Milton's early critics was the greatest of English scholars, Richard Bentley, who in 1732 issued an edition of *Paradise Lost* in which whole passages were relegated to the margin as the spurious interpolations of an imaginary editor. Such a book is, of course, merely a curiosity connecting two

great names. The real beginning in the work of editing Milton as a classic should be edited was made by Thomas Newton, afterwards Bishop of Bristol, who in 1749 brought out an edition of *Paradise Lost*, "with Notes of Various Authors," and followed it in 1752 with a similar volume including *Paradise Regained* and the minor poems. Newton's work was often reprinted, and remained the standard edition till it was superseded by that of the Rev. H. J. Todd which first appeared in 1801. The final issue of Todd is that of 1826 in six volumes which, in spite of many notes which are defective, many which are antiquated and some which are superfluous, may still claim to be the best library edition of Milton. Among the best of those which have appeared since are Thomas Keightley's, published in 1859, which contains excellent notes, and Prof. David Masson's, which is the work of the most learned and devoted of all Milton's editors. Both of these have the advantage of Todd in some respects; Keightley in acuteness and penetration, Masson in completeness of knowledge. But no single editor's work can be a perfect substitute for a *variorum* edition like that of Todd, giving the comments and suggestions of many different minds. The most complete edition of Masson's work is the final library one in three volumes, 1890; there is also a convenient smaller issue, based on this, but omitting some of its editorial matter. It was last printed in three volumes 1893. It contains a Memoir, rather elaborate Introductions to all the poems, an Essay on Milton's English and Versification, and reduced Notes.

A text with Critical Notes by W. Aldis Wright was issued by the Cambridge University Press in one volume, 1903. The text of the earliest printed editions of the several poems was reprinted in 1900 in an edition prepared for the Clarendon Press by the Rev. H. C. Beeching.

It may be worth while adding that Milton's Latin and Italian poems were translated by the poet Cowper and printed in 1808 by his biographer, Hayley, in a beautiful quarto volume with designs by Flaxman. These translations are reprinted in the "Aldine" edition of Milton, 1826. Masson has also given translations of most of them in his *Life of Milton* and in his 1890 library edition of the Poems.

PROSE

The Prose works were, of course, mostly issued as books or pamphlets in Milton's lifetime. They were collected by Toland in three volumes *folio*, 1698. There are several more modern editions; as that published in 1806 in seven volumes

with a *Life* by Charles Symmons; that of Pickering, who included them in his fine eight-volume edition, *The Works of John Milton in Verse and Prose, Edited by John Mitford, 1851*; and that in Bohn's Standard Library, in six volumes, edited, with some notes of a somewhat controversial character, by J. A. St. John, 1848. The first volume of a new edition edited by Sir Sidney Lee appeared in 1905. One of the most curious of the prose works, the *De Doctrina Christiana* or *Treatise of Christian Doctrine*, was not known till 1823, when it was discovered in the State Paper Office. It was edited, with an English translation, by the Rev. C. R. Sumner in 1825 and is included in Bohn's edition.

BIOGRAPHY

The earliest sources for the biography of Milton, outside his own works, are the account given in the *Fasti Oxonienses* of Anthony à Wood, 1691, the *Brief Lives* of John Aubrey, and the *Life* prefixed by the poet's nephew, Edward Phillips, to an edition of the *Letters of State*, printed in 1694. A very large number of *Lives* of Milton have been written since, based on these materials and those collected from a few other sources. The most famous and in some ways the best, in spite of its unfairness, is that of Johnson, to be found in his *Lives of the Poets*. The best short modern *Life* is Mark Pattison's masterly, though occasionally wilful, little book in the English Men of Letters Series. For the library and for students all other biographies have been superseded by the great work of David Masson, who spared no labours to investigate every smallest detail of the life of Milton and to place the whole in the setting of an elaborate history of England in Milton's day. The value of the book is somewhat impaired by the very strong Puritan and anti-Cavalier partisanship of the writer; and its style suffers from an imitation of Carlyle. But nothing can seriously detract from the immense debt every student of Milton owes to the author of this monumental biography which appeared in seven volumes, 1859-1894.

An interesting critical discussion of the various portraits representing or alleged to represent Milton is prefixed to the Catalogue of the Exhibition held at Christ's College Cambridge during the Milton Tercentenary in 1908. It is by Dr. G. C. Williamson.

CRITICISM

A poet at once so learned and so great as Milton inevitably invited criticism. The first and most generous of his critics

was his great rival Dryden, who, in a few words of the preface to *The State of Innocence*, published the year after Milton's death, led the note of praise, which has been echoed ever since by speaking of *Paradise Lost* as "one of the greatest, most noble and most sublime poems which either this age or nation has produced." The next great name in the list is that of Addison, who contributed a series of papers on Milton to the *Spectator* in 1712. Like all criticism except the work of the supreme masters, they are written too exclusively from the point of view of their own day to retain more than a small fraction of their value after two hundred years have passed. But they are of considerable historical interest and may still be read with pleasure, like everything written by Addison. A less sympathetic but finer piece of work is the critical part of Johnson's famous *Life*. It is full of crudities of every sort, such as the notorious remark that "no man could have fancied that he read *Lycidas* with pleasure had he not known the author"; and perhaps nothing Johnson ever wrote displayed more nakedly the narrow limits of his appreciation of poetry. But, in spite of all its defects, it exhibits its writer's great gifts; and its absolute and unshrinking sincerity, its half-reluctant utterance of some of the truest praise ever spoken of Milton, its profound knowledge of the way in which the human mind approaches both literature and life, will always preserve it as one of the most interesting criticisms which Milton has provoked. Johnson's friend, Thomas Warton, in his edition of the minor poems issued in 1785, led the way to an understanding of much in Milton to which Johnson and his school were entirely blind. This movement has continued ever since, and is seen in the immense influence Milton had upon the poets of the nineteenth century, especially upon Wordsworth and Keats; an influence of exactly the opposite sort to that which he exercised with such disastrous effect upon many poets of the century immediately succeeding his own. It is also seen in the finer intelligence of the critical studies of his work. These are far too many to mention here. Among the best are Hazlitt's Lecture on Shakspeare and Milton in his *Lectures on the English Poets*; Matthew Arnold's speech at the unveiling of a Milton memorial, printed in the second series of his *Essays in Criticism*; Sir Walter Raleigh's volume, *Milton*, published in 1900, and *The Epic*, by Lascelles Abercrombie, 1914, which is full of fine and suggestive criticism of Milton. *Milton's Prosody* by Robert Bridges, 1901, is the best study of the metre and scansion of Milton's later poems, especially of *Paradise Lost*.

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